With the Woodlanders and By the Tide

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By A Son of the Marshes

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WITH THE WOODLANDERS

AND

BY THE TIDE

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BY THE TIDE

BY

A SON OF THE MARSHES

AUTHOR OF 'ON SURREY HILLS,'
'WITHIN AN HOUR OF LONDON TOWN,' 'ANNALS OF
A FISHING VILLAGE,' 'FOREST TITHES,' ETC.

EDITED BY

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WITH THE WOODLANDERS, AND BY THE TIDE.

CHAPTER I.

WITH THE WOODLANDERS.

WOODLAND folk-lore is fast dying out: very little will be left to us after another quarter of a century has elapsed. The older folks now rarely speak openly about those matters which formed common topics of conversation forty years ago in our woodland districts. Indeed their sons and daughters profess to laugh at the superstitions (*sic*) in which their parents still firmly believe. But their ridicule is really affected: their actions constantly prove them to be firm believers, in spite of themselves, in what they gathered as little children from their

elders. Only those who lived among the woodlanders forty years ago know what their daily lives were like. There are still some lonely enough homesteads scattered here and there through the forest; but roads intersect it now in all directions, whereas at the time I allude to no roads existed—only a network of tracks, amongst which I frequently went astray until I learned to know the country well.

Neighbours, so-called, lived far apart. "I'll jest step over an' fetch Will's missis to ye, dame—you bein' so uncommon poorly like," was the sort of thing often heard amongst them; "Will's missis" living probably a couple of miles away. Six, and even eight miles away from a doctor many of them were; so no wonder the women-folks were well skilled in simple remedies, productions of their own garden-plots, for "mother" always had a bit of ground for her herb-garden. It was not very often that a doctor was required, and chiefly when those accidents occurred that household medicines cannot alleviate.

Of the town's people or their ways they knew nothing: in fact, all town-dwellers were looked on with suspicion, when through changes they

were obliged to deal with them—as, for instance, when some of the woodlanders' horses and carts were required when that first big house was being built, where house had never been before. When that great event took place, one said "he waunt able not jest then to do it," alluding to some offered job; another remarked that he'd "'sidder on it"; at last one bolder than the rest said he'd "chance it." Now this really meant that he had his doubts about getting paid for the carting; but when he found himself promptly paid on the Saturday for his week's work, and paid well, with the further guarantee that this would be the rule if he continued on with the work, his ideas about "chance" or chances changed completely. Much the same state of affairs existed when some of the young fellows were required for ground men-labourers. "Not if they knowed it; they waunt a-goin' to; they never had. They reckined they wouldn't do so; what was the use on it?"

Here again, at last, one or two ventured, as pioneers for the others; and not only did these give satisfaction—for it was work they had been accustomed to daily, and what they were required

to do was to them a comparatively easy task—but the first week's pay was to them a complete revelation. They had heard about such money being earned by those who, at intervals few and far between, visited the outside world; but they never had believed it to be truly stated. Civil, hard-working fellows they all were, full of manly independence. In my own daily work I came in constant contact with them, but they kept aloof from the other workmen as a rule. In the morning they were on the works to a minute; in the evening, when the day's work was done, they were lost sight of in the woods.

Years passed before I could say that I knew much about these woodland dwellers, but I got to understand them at last. Personally I have found them fiercely conservative, and I never found fault with them on that score. Their knowledge, though not gained through books, made them keen observers of human nature. In their own peculiar way they would patiently thresh matters out. It might be months before any signs would be given for or against a new movement; but given either way, it was final.

One strangely reserved character,—a master of all woodcraft in the opinion of his comrades, whose goodwill I had tried to gain in order that we might have a sociable chat together — but, as I thought, to no purpose,—said one day as I was leaving the works, "You strolls about middlin' o' nights like, don't ye? If you likes to come along o' me some night to my shanty, 'tis a tidy distance off like, you're welcome." I found him to be a keen intelligent man, and from him I learned much of the woodlanders and their ways of thinking, of woodcraft, and of all things living under green leaves. It could only be expected that those who from one generation to another have lived in the very centre of natural life should be as observant of all Nature's various aspects as the wild creatures around them; and they have also their own theories about natural phenomena —theories which very frequently proved to be important facts. Their lives being spent in the open air, summer and winter, they have to observe all weather-signs. The old people used to be so proficient in this that many of the farmers, such as they were at the time I allude to, would take

their opinions unhesitatingly when the crops were about.

In all the years I have known them—many now—I never knew one who did not, the first thing in the morning and the last thing at night, give his opinion about the weather. Being so much alone—for their employment as a rule was, from the very nature of it, to a certain extent solitary—they pondered over matters, and worked them out in their own way. In calm or in storm, in sunshine or darkness, they found matters to ponder over deeply. No matter how hard their work was, they were always in close touch with the object under consideration. Their religious feelings were naturally strong ones; for they believed literally in all they read in their Bibles, and acted on that belief, each one according to his or her light. Theirs was—and it is now in some parts that I still visit—a stern puritanical faith, one that was upheld against all new-comers unflinchingly. Obedience to parents, one of the chief features in it, was carried to such a pitch as to become almost tyranny.

I was able to associate closely with these people,

for my work lay in their midst, and I belonged to them by force of sympathy. It was a pleasure to me to be able to tell them where many of their beautiful woodland legends originated: some of them had, indeed, direct bearing on the book they read and studied so deeply—the Bible, in fact. And with the aid of my pencil I could make matters clearer at times than they would otherwise have been. As I supplemented any little information I gave by reading to them from works treating on the subjects under discussion, and offered them the books to read for themselves, I was eased of too great responsibility in the matter; and if there is one thing the wood-dwellers prize more than another it is "book larnin'," as they call it. "To git hold on a book, an' read away at it, hard words an' all, an' no spellin', an' to be able to write like print," was at that time something to be talked about in their isolated dwellings.

One poor old soul observed: "I was afeard as he'd never git at what father an' me wanted to tell Tom in furrin parts; but, bless ye, he was that patient-like, never sayin' a word afore we'd

done; an' then he writ it and read it to us. He'd said in it all as we wanted to say, an' more as we could 'a said like. An' then he 'rected it to Tom so plain—why, bless ye, I could see where 'twas goin' myself, an' I'm but a poor schollard."

Trifles are very large factors in making people happy. No matter what they might tell me, I never smiled at them; indeed it is not in my nature to smile much, I fear. And they, like myself, were terribly in earnest about the matters of daily life. For do not fresh problems present themselves almost hourly—the why and the wherefore of those things that are continually taking place around us? When the mists covered the hills and formed themselves into strange masses, as the currents of air played on them, it was small wonder if they likened one of the weird shapes to some figure vividly described in a passage they had recently pondered over. So closely were some of them in touch with nature, that they might have been called spiritualists of the woodlands. The wild creatures to them were all definite powers for good or evil in their direct relationship to man; and in nearly all cases that I was

brought into contact with, they were in my opinion correct in their theories. They did not try to convince one; they simply said they "knowed it, an' that was enuf fur them."

Men, women, and children could give the calls of any creature, furred or feathered, which they were in the habit of seeing daily, no matter what the cry might be,—rage, or fear, or that of gentle warning, or the soft calls of mating-time. "Mother"—this was the universal title for all married women who had children—very rarely exercised the gift of woodland tongues. They would tell you they had "done it often enough when they was gals, but sich foolishness was done with now." I have heard young women whistle beautifully, mimicking the songs of the birds, the blackbird and thrush particularly. They fashioned simple instruments by the fireside, which were easily carried in the pocket, the whole lot of them, with which they mimicked the calls of the various species. If they wished to see whether a stoat, weasel, crow, or jay was about, they would place their lips on the back of one hand and squeal horribly, the cries becoming weaker

each time, exactly like those of a rabbit caught in a trap, or fixed by a stoat or weasel. Crows, magpies, and jays know very well what that cry means: it is as a dinner-bell to them, for after the stoat or weasel leaves a rabbit, a feathered company come to eat him. As the evening got more dusky, the boys would come out in their gardens, which were surrounded by the fir-woods, to call the owls to them. They would hiss and snore like the white owl — the barn-owl; hoot, click, and bark like the wood-owl—the brown or tawny owl; and squeak like mice, for the pleasure of seeing the owl swoop towards the place where the sound or sounds proceeded from.

"You bide still, an' see ef I don't fetch him in this 'ere fir close to our gate," said one to me. I did "bide still," being very much interested in the whole performance. First he locked his hands together with the thumbs upright, and into the hollow of the hands he blew between the thumbs. This was the hooting-machine; and it was simply perfect. Hoo, hoo, hoo, hoo'e hoo! rang out—the fourth note being longer than the others. Then followed the click of the bill, as the fine bird snaps

it in pleasant anticipation of mouse, finishing up with the bark when the bird springs from his resting-place. All this was done to perfection by the boy; but the master-touches were yet to come. With a small piece of twig he rattled tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, like the short patter of a mouse on dry leaves; for all mice travel intermittingly,—there is a short rush, and then a halt for a few seconds. No owl was visible yet, but the bird had got close to, when he heard the rustle. As the lad squeaked as a mouse will when he runs at night, he looked up and pointed: there was the owl ready for his mouse. When the bird caught sight of us, he departed in the same noiseless fashion in which he had arrived.

I have not heard white owls hoot,—they do hoot at times, or bark; but the eagle-owl, wood-owl, long-eared owl, and the short-eared owl, together with the little owl, also the coquimbo or prairie-owl, all bark and mew at times. The little owl as a good barker surpasses all the others; he has barked at me many a time. When the long-eared owls have young ones, you can hear these mewing in the woods at dusk, just like a lot of kittens.

The beautiful white owl will, at times, come and perch on a bough right over some path in the woods, and will sit there quite regardless—to all appearance—of those who may pass beneath him. The satin-like white of the bird's breast fixes the eye at once, and this, with the full dark eyes set in his heart-shaped face, gives him a most weird look in the gloaming. No one attacks him then: they look on him with fear, for he is no longer a bird but a feathered form of evil, come to warn them of coming misfortune; whilst a white mouse caught or seen in a dwelling-house always denotes death.

Simple facts of everyday life only do I treat of here. I do not profess to give a sketch of any imaginary woodland Arcadia. No such poetical place has ever existed, nor ever will, whilst common humanity with all its hopes and fears, and its tumultuous passions, has play. But one thing I am sure of: all the fads brought out by a certain class for the so-called improvement of woodland people have miserably failed, and ever will fail. "'Tis our wotes, not us, as they wants," they say, and this sums up the whole matter. I have nothing to do

with politics, being only a roadside naturalist. I simply look on at the working of the very complicated political machinery. Loyal people the woodlanders have always been, and they are that now; but they have been, as they call it, "soaped over a bit, and they ain't a-goin' tu hev no more on it." Folks are very conservative, indeed, at heart in the woodland districts.

It is the same with the people we are describing as it is with townsfolk, in that some families have lived honest hard-working lives from generation to generation, their sons and daughters turning out well, a pleasure and a comfort to the old folks; others have gone a different way. There is a distinct line drawn under green leaves for those who do not act exactly as they ought to; but there are nature's ladies and gentlemen there, and nothing is said or done to wound the feelings of the erring ones—although they are very quietly forced to see that some of their doings are not liked.

Black doings—consulting the Wise Woman, for instance—are detested by the puritanical dwellers of the wilds. "Bad comes on it: never a soul

yet tampered with evil without sufferin' for't. There's the word o' Scripture agin it—dead agin it. The devil will have his own soon enough, without folks helpin' him to git 'em. He don't want no helpin', Old Cocky Hoop don't."

I have seen scores of faces of both men and women that would have served as perfect models for paintings of historical subjects depicting the times of the Covenanters and Puritans. Hard-headed, earnest people these, who spoke about the ways of the Lord and the thundering of His chariots often in their daily course of life. That earnest way of living, which kept them pure both in body and soul, I have heard called "being under the iron sway of superstitious fanaticism." If those who speak thus had only a portion of their childlike faith in the hereafter, it would, I think, be better for them. Even heedless boys are cynics now, their parents being only old-fashioned blocks to stumble over. If this is the effect of the New Light that has been so freely flashed upon us lately, God help the forthcoming generation! From childhood I have only known one rallying-cry, "Fear God; honour the Queen!" If those who are so extremely anxious

for the benefit of their fellow-creatures did benefit them, there might be something to be said in their favour; but their only object seems to be that of benefiting themselves. New-comers and their fads, many of them mischievous and very inconvenient ones, are not in touch with the people, and they never will be.

Some of the folk-lore and the innocent devices employed by the lasses at certain times are harmless enough in all ways. Not one of the girls would plead guilty to the slightest suspicion of romance in their composition,—indeed the word is only used by them to denote all that is wild and extravagant,—and yet, unconsciously to themselves, they are full of it. Their surroundings foster it. Some of the songs we have listened to—for the lasses can sing, or could — all told of love and happy marriage, or of disappointed affections and early graves. Very often, still, I find myself breaking out into a stave of a good honest greenwood song.

But there is a darker side to what I am writing about, for forest blood runs hotly, as it has ever done. One spot that I know well—a deep sullen

mill-pool surrounded by trees, with a foot-bridge over it—has a very evil reputation: they say it is haunted.

Two men once wanted to marry the same woman —a difficult matter, looked at properly—and being rivals, they were, as is usually the case, bitter foes. On a disastrous night they met on the bridge over the mill-pool, and one of them was never seen again. Months afterwards the remains of a body were found entangled in the submerged tree-roots. In out-of-the-way places such things were not looked into so sharply as they are now. The man that was left alone on that foot-bridge was ever afterwards a miserable coward in the dark. I knew that from personal observation. So well indeed was this known, that the little school-children used to mock at him. He had a miserable end. As in all other places on the face of the earth, good and evil can be found side by side in the woodlands.

I have observed that all, townsfolk as well as rustics, hold up their hands for Sunday-schools. No matter whether they belong to the Church of England or to the Nonconformists, all working folks are agreed there. There is a spontaneous acknow-

ledgment on the people's part that these work for good. The father of a young family observed to me quite recently, "It ain't what I believes—I knows best about that—but I don't want my young ones to think as I do about things, leastways not yet a while. Them 'ere Sunday-schools is good things; they don't larn nothin' but what's good there."

One worthy old soul, a mother in Israel, was wont to expound to me, as we sat in the chimney-corner, about visions and the Witch of Endor. These had been; "there was nothin' on the face o' the airth to perwent sich things agin happenin'." I never said a word, only nodded to her from time to time. After a fresh pinch of snuff she would break out again about the elect coming in a whirlwind with their chariots of fire. Presently she would put on her spectacles, and then we had it, chapter and verse.

Every now and again I nodded to her, just to let her see I was following her very closely. She must have been a shining light in the little Bethel she attended, for I never heard so much in so short a space of time in my life before, as she gave me one

night. As the husband and son had gone out, she might have thought it a proper time to improve the state of one whom she evidently considered to be a lost sheep. I had more than enough of whirlwinds and chariots, as well as of visions, whilst I lived with them.

The robin, the woodman's companion, naturally comes in for his full share of folk-lore: he cries when things look "peaked,"—when, for instance, in certain changes of the atmosphere before hard weather sets in, the buds on the leafless trees stand out like sharp points—the beech-tree tips particularly. Directly the leaves are off the trees, you see preparations making for the coming spring-time.

"You can't hide from a robin; they're bound to find ye out," they say. This is very true: the bird will surely come to you in the most out-of-the-way places. "Don't ye see they got to do it; they comes to see if any little children wants happin' up with leaves again. No matter who 'tis, they feeds a robin when he comes; an' he knows what's comin' when he cries to ye." All birds being sure indicators by their cries and movements as to what the

weather is likely to be, they are more noticed than other creatures; and the robin particularly, from his peculiarity of coming direct to man. Sheep tell the shepherd by their movements all he requires to know, and he prepares accordingly. "The hills are drawing nigh," they say; "we shall have wet before long:" and the rain does come, more or less of it.

The wryneck, or cuckoo's mate, or the rinding bird, as he is called by the bark-strippers or "bark-flayers," makes his pee-pee-peet heard in spring when the oak sap rises, and the rind, or bark, is taken off after felling. The golden-crested wren is called the bee-bird, because it is the smallest bird they are acquainted with. This is a very good country name for the little creature.

If a bird pecks at a window, or takes shelter in any house, dire will be the consternation of the inmates: words of comfort are useless; if you are wise, hold your tongue, and wait for daylight, or you will have it proved to you conclusively that you are no better than "a misbelieving heathen."

There are two kinds of the so-called "witch-knots": one of these consists of only a bunch of

leaves matted together, because the little twigs have got interlaced somehow; but the genuine and much-prized witch-knot is a woody wart-like protuberance, mostly of the shape of a small puff-ball. It is found at times on other trees; but the beech produces these circular nobs more, I think, than other trees. These are knocked off, and, as treasures, pocketed and religiously kept as a cure, and also a preventive, of rheumatism. I have seen some of the old ladies turn their very large pockets out when they could not feel just what they wanted, and one or two witch-knots would be sure to come out, beautifully polished by constant friction against the "jumbles" those bag-like pockets contained. A knuckle-bone, white and glistening, would also be sure to turn up, or rather out. This article was considered to keep cramps away from the one who carried it.

But dearly prized above all was some article kept for *luck*. Any prized article might be mourned over if they lost it, but the idea of losing the "luck" was too much even to dream about.

A good old creature gave me as a parting gift a luck-stone. It was one of the quaintest, most elfish-looking, grinning heads I have ever seen; and it

had been carved by some rustic genius, or rather fashioned from a large peach-stone, having two small white beads inserted for eyes. The holes in the beads served as eye-pupils. The thing's head was fixed to a wooden button, a little dog's-toothed patterned collar of red and black was fixed round it, and the name of the whole was "Jobber." I carried "Jobber" long about with me to laugh at, and make others laugh, when I was far away from the giver; but at last I gave the fetish away to a woodland friend who had often looked at it with longing eyes: he told me over and over again that there was "summut in it." There was certainly enough quaint mischievous ugliness in that little figure-head to frighten some. Luck or no luck, I parted with "Jobber," and the only things I missed were his own impish features.

It is considered a sad misfortune to let the old-fashioned eight-day clocks run down, or to let the wood-embers die out in the hearths, either in summer or in winter. I have seen the master of the house draw the clock up before going to bed, and tap the face of it, as if he were bidding good night to one of his own children.

That cruel piece of folk-lore which leads to boring a hole in an ash-tree, and placing a poor little shrewmouse in it alive, and then plugging the hole up, so as to convert the tree into what they call a shrew-ash, supposed to be useful for curing certain diseases in cattle, is no longer practised in the southern woodlands, although until very recently the custom obtained in the New Forest. Cast horse-shoes and sprigs of the mountain-ash can still be seen fixed to stable-doors almost everywhere.

The carters, the older men, on some of the old manor farms, have told me strange tales of spells being thrown over their horses. Fortunately, I can keep my features at times fairly under control, and I have never offended, so far as I know, one single member of this class of people. I do not wish to do so if I can help it, for I respect them. Some have, however, paid dearly for their ridicule, which is bad coin to try to pass in the woodlands. "Up-end yerself!" (Stand up!) the insulted one will cry, and the thing is done; and, as a rule, a good job is made of it. Men and women who have left the country when they

were in their teens, hold firmly to these folk-lore traditions in spite of some would-be scientists, who say there is a cause for everything, if we could but find it. We do not find the causes for certain things — we never shall; and so humanity will hope and doubt and fear to the last.

Some of the traditions that have been handed down to us are so pure and good, that they must have originated at some time or other from a good source alone. Yet a certain class are most earnestly trying to sweep away with a moneyed broom the folk-lore and traditions of ages, and to remodel a class of people that have been, and are now, of very rugged but kindly natures.

As in the Obi's practices in the West Indies, personal malice is brought to bear on victims by those who work on the credulity of their dupes.

"I say, mister, do ye believe in witchcraft? I bin goin' to ask ye lots o' times, fust chance I had; now I got it," said a rustic to me one day.

"No, I do not; and I hope you have not got that nonsense in your head."

"Ah, well, you don't know about everything."

This I at once acknowledged, at the same time telling him I did not feel particularly anxious to know much about the matter in question.

"I don't want to 'fend [offend] ye," he persisted; "I want to tell ye 'bout them 'ere pigs o' mine what was witched. Now, look here,—I killed my pig and bought another; but, ye see, that 'ere fresh pig died the week arter I bought un. I goes an' gits another pig, puts un in the werry same sty, and he dies too."

"Did you lime-white your sty out after you had lost your first pig?"

"No; what for? what's lime-white tu do with pigs? never did lime-white 'em,—don't mean to; them 'ere two pigs was witched. I went to the wise woman—you dunno who she is, an' I ain't a-goin' tu tell ye; but she pinted out a hook-nosed old varmint o' a woman as lived in a shanty all by herself up in the moor. Her place was close to a spring, where she could come an' dip her pitcher. If she'd bin 'bliged tu cross runnin' water, she couldn't ha' lived there: runnin' water takes all the powers o' mischief out o' them sort o' cattle. Well, the wise woman told me that if

I could draw a drap o' blood from that old varmint, all the witchcraft would leave that 'ere pig-sty. I got on to that 'ere job quick; but waunt she desprit artful? Two marnin's she didn't cum out. You knows them 'ere big shawl-pins, with black tops to 'em, don't ye? well, I nips one o' they from my missus, unbeknown to her like, and carts it about with me, all ready fur the job. The third marnin' I laid up fur her in the fuzzes, an' arter a bit I sees her cum hobblin' out fur tu git water; then I slips up behind her an' jobs that ere shawl-pin into her three or four times, fur witchin' my pigs. Massey oh! didn't she squawkul an' squall, like some old hen. She dropped her pitcher, an' got back indoors quicker 'an she cum out; an' I kicked her pitcher tu bits, I did."

This was too much for me: I told him in rough and unmeasured words what I thought of him, winding up by saying that if I had been about when the atrocious deed was done, I should have done my best to get him three months' hard labour. The truth of the matter I found out was this: the poor old creature who had been so brutally treated had warned some woodland lass against

going to the wise woman. Love-charms and philtres were in request centuries ago, but so they are now in some places I could mention. I knew the ways of that wise woman, and also knew her personally, and I could have placed hands on her at any time. Those love-potions are not harmless ones if fairly administered in a man's drink. There are those who know the real nature of one very beautiful but horribly dangerous vegetable production that in its season is so very common in forest districts—the scarlet fungus that grows at the foot of some trees. One of the properties—only one out of many—is this: it will make a chattering, silly fool of a wise man. This is a very unpleasant subject, and one about which I do not care to say too much. Those who have written about the innocent unsophisticated dwellers of the woodlands have written utter nonsense. I have known some of these so-called innocent dwellers of the woods go just as far as they possibly could with safety, in order to gain their own ends. One of the companions of my younger days, a fine good-looking fellow, only escaped by the skin of his teeth from having a potion of this kind given him by a lass

who did not attempt to conceal her open admiration. The girl's own sister, however, prevented its being administered to him. But from the first I have held those who live under green leaves in high esteem: their sterling honesty, their handiness in all they set their hands to, their determination not to be beaten over difficult jobs—these qualities, added to their stubborn independence, make them prime favourites of mine, and to this class I owe the greater part of my knowledge of the southern counties.

Often has one or another of the woodmen brought me news of stray visitants and birds—sights that they knew would have interest for me. One day, for instance, I was told that great flocks of bramblings were in some particular old beech-woods, a pair of the birds being brought to me as specimens. This was in the winter-time, and as they fed directly the sun got high enough to make the snow-covered country glisten, I started very early for the five miles' walk through the deep snow; bitterly cold it was, and the stars were shining brightly.

Snow-covered woodlands have a silent beauty of their own, more especially when the hard-frozen

hoar-frost has covered them. Although I was well clothed and walking at a quick step, the wind seemed to cut through me like a knife; soon, however, I was sheltered by the high banks of the woods through which my road ran. After clearing the woods and getting on to the open road, I was reminded of the hard times by little dark heaps which lay here and there, the bodies of thrushes and red-wings, so completely starved that they were merely frames covered with feathers; and, frozen to death, they had tumbled out of the cover in the hedge where they had been roosting. In such bitter weather as this these birds wander from their usual haunts in search of food, getting weaker and weaker until they flutter into the first bit of cover which presents itself by the roadside as night comes on, there to die.

It was hard trampling through and over the snow, but I got into a nice glow as it was getting lighter, and made for the cottage of one of my woodland friends which was about a mile from the beech-wood. A nice cup of hot tea, with just a suspicion of something in it, added considerably to my comfort.

"'Nation seize ye!" cried the man as he handed me the cup, "hev ye been out all night and got lost?

We shall be goin' to work some morning and find ye stiff and dead, damned if we shan't! Ye makes me say these things to yer. Ef I sarved ye right, I should lay this 'ere old scrub-broom over your head! What brought ye out this time o' morning?"

"To look at a lot of bramble finches feeding under the beeches in the Long Walk when the sun gets up. Charley brought me the news."

"Jog along with me then, for I be goin' by there."

It was a sight to be remembered as the sun rose, that long line of fine trees sparkling in all their jewelled bravery. The wind had swept the path clear of snow before it had time to freeze, so that the thick dead leaves were only held by the frost; here I found that the bramblings were settled in flocks of two and three hundred in order to stock out the beech-mast, which was hidden underneath them.

From the giant hollies the chuck of the blackbird, followed by the weep of the robin and the chit-chit-chit of the wren, could be heard. Some wood-pigeons clapped off from the woods that fringed the trout-stream, the little tinkling falls of which

were now a mass of icicles. Twink-twink-twink-twink, then came the harsh notes of the bramblings. A fine sight was this, for the lover of birds to see them busily at work in such numbers; sorry indeed should I have been to have missed it; for although these birds have always frequented these woods from time to time, they have never been seen in such numbers as this.

You are not able to go just where you like in the woodlands, even if it is wild land. Those who come into the country for a few weeks or months, as the case may be, to write on rural matters, go away little wiser than they came. If there is one thing these people dislike more than another, it is being questioned; and if the course is persisted in, strangers get told a good deal, but little that is useful. To one rash individual who tried to interview me I gave valuable information, which if published would outdo Baron Munchausen. Brain-suckers are in force just now, and our villages and rural population get too much written about.

Owlets, as the large moths are called, find scant favour with the woodlanders: they rob the bee-hives, they say. I have known some of the

sphinxes enter the old-fashioned skeps. The death's-head moth is a real terror to any household that it may visit; so are bats. Things of darkness they call these. One touching ceremony is still observed by the old people who keep bees—that of going to the hives and telling the inmates when a death takes place in the family. One of my rustic friends once told me he would get me some moon-seed. The wonderful properties of this small moon-wort fern, which are still firmly believed in, would cause my readers to smile if I related them. Some curious old copies of works on herbs are still to be found in the homes of the woodland families, in which all the planetary influences are minutely given. These are most precious property, jealously guarded from profane eyes. The best and most costly work on botany of the present day would be regarded as dirt compared with their old musty treasures, for they deal with some of those mysteries of Nature, those problems they have been trying to work out in their own fashion all their lives.

The black art, the fancied possession of forbidden knowledge, although repudiated by the greater por-

tion, has some strange fascination for them. I was the involuntary listener to a conversation that ran as follows:—

"What's that ye say? Old Bitters dyin'?"

"Ay, he is dyin' hard: he can't go his journey yet; an', mark my words, he wunt be 'lowed to start on it afore he gives up them 'ere black books o' his. I knows who they wus reckined tu pass tu, when old Bitters passed away. But if he can't go afore them 'ere desprit wicked things is burnt, t'other wunt hev 'em." Then lowering his voice, he added: "I've heerd that queer figgers in red and black are in them 'ere books, an' signs o' planets. If you 'members, he warn't never sociable like; an' he muttered tu himself at times. But it ain't fur me to judge him nohow. If he goes afore mornin', we shall know them 'ere things is burnt. I wouldn't handle one on 'em myself for a fortin."

The poor fellow did pass away in the night, and the next morning it was whispered all over the hamlet that "Old Bitters' black books was burnt to tinder."

All this may read strangely in this nineteenth

century of ours, but it is the plain truth, and very much more of the sort could be told. Wise women, so-called, did not, however, rely on country people for their ill gains. From towns where the church-bells are ringing continually for service, men and women still leave the sound of their calling to glean information from a foul old hag; and this within an hour of London town. Infinite mischief, beyond all repair, has she caused her dupes to pay for, and they have to hold their tongues over it.

When first I settled among the woodland folk, I fancied they must get up to go to work in the middle of the night, so very early did they rise; but they went to bed early too. Until I got used to it, I was very often startled out of my sleep by the cries of wild creatures. Who could suppose that the hooting and barking of an owl was the signal to let others know some were passing by, in the darkness, to their work? But so it was. One of the youngsters where I lived for a time used to respond to this with the scream of the vixen, when she answers reynard's bark. From the hill-tops could be heard the blowing of cow-horns —some of them were masters in the art of horn-

blowing: between three and four in the morning in summer, and five o'clock in the morning in winter, these people were about, and none went out without having had some hot tea and something to eat. Timber-felling in the spring, and copse-cutting; hoop-shaving in winter, and charcoal-burning. Just for a change some would do a bit of harvesting, but nearly all their time was spent in and about the woods and the moors: they always had some job in hand there, or one to look forward to. Eight miles a-day, each way, was not considered too much to walk, out and home. I have done eighteen myself very comfortably; but when the distance was over this, they camped out, in forest style, and very comfortable camping-quarters they made for themselves. Firs were felled, and a hut built and thatched, with a wattle door, packed with heather, very quickly.

By their camp-fires I have often listened as they related circumstances that had occurred in the past; but the greatest treat to me was to hear them talk in their quiet unassuming fashion of all the mysteries of southern wood-craft. At that time I had just returned from a visit to my native marshes

and the bleak foreshores, so I was able to tell them about the wild creatures, and other matters, that dwellers inland rarely see. I have been hunting about in these districts for years, and yet have not seen one quarter of what I still hope to see. Some fresh thing comes to the front, in one way or another, almost daily.

The vegetable growth and the insect life that gathers about old trees are a vital necessity to many creatures. I have known owls, jackdaws, woodpeckers, starlings, squirrels, and great bats—and these latter not of the smaller species—all have their homes in one large decaying tree. And "Jackup" is to be found established in the branches above, and a large family of hedgehogs will be settled below him. The creatures all leave their peculiar traces, which are easily distinguished if you are at all versed in wood-lore.

Those castings at the foot of the tree, for instance, dropped accidentally by the bird, are quite enough to tell you that the owl is there; and jackdaws, squirrels, and starlings announce the fact of their presence in the same unmistakable fashion. One or two round holes, the openings to the old or

the new nest,—if we may call a small tunnel with a few chips at the bottom a nest,—will tell that the woodpecker has located himself in that trunk. As to the bats, your nose will quickly inform you of their habitat.

That the jackdaw is a small crow, and the rook a larger member of the same family, is quickly proved by one action common to these birds. They both place one foot on any substance, living or dead, before pulling it to pieces, holding it down so as to get a purchase on it with their bills.

It is fortunate for all things created that there is as much true humanity in the world as there is, in spite of the cruelty that is only too common, not only in "the dark places of the earth," but where there is supposed to be more light. Now and again one comes across humans of the rougher type (*sic*) that have a strong love for life in all its shapes. One lad I knew got twenty-two half-fledged jackdaws out of some old trees where the parent birds had been shot; and not only these but four owls with them. After the sun has gone down three men will go through the trees; two with guns, the third carries a stick. When they come to a

decayed tree, the men with the guns place themselves one on either side of it, a little way back from its trunk. Then the man with the stick raps vigorously, and as decayed wood is an especially good conductor of sound, this causes a terrible row within the hollowed receptacles. The sleeping birds fancy that their tree is coming down; out they dash, they get shot, and the poor half-fledged young ones are left to perish. To use the lad's own homely words, he "Couldn't stick it out nohow; he heard the young jacks there hollering for grub, and the owls whined; so he swarmed up and took out the lot of them; ain't it more marciful than leaving 'em to die of hunger? Some on 'em I can sell, an' the rest can go loose when they can feed on their own hook."

I always think there is something pathetic in the appearance of premature wisdom a young jackdaw has—it is enough to melt the hardest heart. One of that lad's "lot" found a home with me; I could not resist the expression of the creature when he brought it to me. Fully fledged he certainly was, but the skin round his gape was soft. He could not feed himself, and as he perched on the finger of the

kind lad who had saved him from a cruel and lingering death, he held his head down, humped his shoulders up, and uttered a weak quavering jar-kee-kee! which appealed irresistibly to me, so that he was forthwith taken in to be comforted and coddled up. Here he is now, and he has all the little ways of a spoilt child, giving way to temper at times in the most ludicrous manner possible. He gets into mischief very frequently, so that the mistress declares that she does not know what he will come to.

Although so many different forms of life will make their habitat in the same old tree, or use it as a place of shelter, either for purposes of rest or for breeding in, yet each individual creature knew his own side of the house, so to speak, and how to keep it. Yet I have watched most amusing squabbles amongst them. As soon as the young jackdaws could perch, you might see them all out on one of the tree limbs nearest the hole they had been hatched out in. If the green woodpecker, in shinning up and round the trunk, poked his crimson topped head up near the branch they were sitting on, dire would be the commotion that ensued. The

young birds' feathers would bluff out, and a concert of quavering cries would be heard from the whole family. Then this brings the old birds crashing down through the leaves from the top boughs to see what is the matter, which does not put the yaffle out in the least degree. He simply dodges round the limbs, now here and now there, finally setting up a defiant yike! as he dashes down to some emmet-heaps near to his own little nook in the wreck, which was once a grand tree.

Sometimes the squirrels and the starlings would fall out, and then there would be a rare to-do! for the squirrels would stamp, chatter, and whisk about, whilst the starlings could hardly give vent to their indignation in sufficiently quick terms. They dived in and out of the holes where their nests were, puffed out the feathers of their throats until the hackle feathers stood out, and chattered their loudest, now and again mournfully whistling by way of a change.

Probably there was a good reason for all this disturbance; for the squirrel will now and again indulge his carnivorous propensities just like some other creatures who are supposed to be vegetarians.

As to the bats, they are best left alone. A quaint-looking, long-legged individual I know, who has more practical information about life, furred and feathered, than most folks have, because, as he says, "I've paid for it, dear boy—paid for it," will sometimes, when I come across him, tap his unusually large nose and say, "Bats overhead, in that hole—I can smell 'em." At this I am apt to walk on, for my own scent is keen. "Come back, my boy, and see me hustle 'em out of it," he cried one day. I went back, and he got the lot out. I have never stopped to witness a bat-rout since.

CHAPTER II.

POACHERS AND POACHING.

I DO not intend to touch in any way on the game-laws, or to give the very barest description of the methods employed by those who poach and capture the creatures without the leave of others. It is a great pity that those who have explained, for the benefit of a too credulous public, how the thing is done, have not been capable enough to prevent its recurrence. In the present chapter I only offer a few sketches from life of some so-called delinquents I have known.

"I am on his track," one guardian of the covers observed to me, as he saw a man walking on the highroad; "I shall have him to a dead certainty." But he spoke prematurely, for the individual pointed

out led the guardian of the covers such a dance, and hoodwinked him so completely, that the small boys of the district laughed over the matter. If you require a good gun, one that you can rely on, you must pay for it; and so you must if you wish to have good and efficient keepers. The pittance that some gentlemen pay their so-called keepers is really not enough to keep them honest. A great awkward, ignorant fellow, as "fore-right" as a bull at a hedge, is hardly the person to place in a position of responsibility, and he is sure to get himself into hot water. There is one thing to be said—good men would not stop one week with some of those who pass as game-preservers, save the mark!

Some depredations had been committed in a country place I knew, without the offenders having been brought to book for it; so the principal parties interested in the matter met in the parlour of the one small inn of the locality, to devise some plan or plans for their capture. This was at about three o'clock in the afternoon. Everything was arranged to the perfect satisfaction of all parties, apparently, but the landlord formed one of the committee. Quite by accident, as it seemed, one of the villagers

presently strolled in for a pint. A few whispered words passed between him and the landlord, and the man left. Half an hour later distant shots were heard following each other in rapid succession. The guardians of the home coverts heard them, and rushed off to find that a complete slaughter had been rapidly effected.

The next morning one of the principals in that shoot walked by those covers—a public path ran by the side of the largest—and he found the "head-un" stroking his stubbly chin, and using at intervals the strongest language he was capable of. "He'd have 'em, if he watched day and night for 'em." This he said to the man who was so innocently walking round. The latter replied that "he hoped he might git 'em; for sich goin's on, in broad daylight, in a little village like theirs was parfectly scand'lous."

Some people are as clever in laying traps for others as monkeys in cocked hats might be; less clever indeed, one ought to say.

There are men, however, whose unflinching but unassuming efforts to carry out their duties have gained for them the respect of the very class they are continually at war with. I am not fond of the

word poacher; it is not a nice name to give to furred or feathered creatures, still less to men, but the title has been used so long that it will never be dropped now. It has become time-honoured at least, for it dates from the time that the red-deer were the objects of pursuit and capture. The hunting instinct is strong in all Englishmen; with some poachers sport is the main object; one man's wits being pitted in some cases against those of half-a-dozen other men, has lent some attraction to the thing. In six cases out of ten it may be estimated that the one man wins.

I have no desire to defend the practice of poaching in any way, far from it; for those who rear large quantities of game have to pay a very heavy price for it. I have known some of the keenest game-preservers of the past time, before driving and other, to my mind, objectionable practices were in vogue: stern men they were in all matters concerning poaching, but they never suffered from it to the extent that some do now—not one quarter of it; and for this reason, their keepers were good men like their masters. If they found a poacher, one that they knew to be one, they never tried to

implicate a man in a hurry, or, as we should express it, to make a job of it beforehand. "I have not found you at work, and I hope you won't give me the chance; but you are trespassing, so you clear out," was the sort of exhortation given. One man who was caught red-handed, before they led him off, after he had been convicted, said to the keeper: "You warned me right enough, an' I've got it, three months hard; but you ain't got nuthin' to do with that, fur I bin up afore, fur a job in another place." Then he added wistfully, "If you has a broken rabbit at any time, fur mercy sake, let 'em have it," meaning his wife and children.

To this appeal the man addressed answered, "Confound you! Do you mean me to help to keep them, now you are going? I never heard of such confounded impudence!" The poacher knew full well, however, in spite of this speech, that he had not appealed in vain. The same head-keeper—a man in the full sense of the word—one of our great animal painters painted the portrait of his magnificent retriever with a pheasant in his mouth, and presented it to him,—said one morning, "We have got Ned, Squire."

"Where is he?"

"In the brewhouse, with two keepers looking after him."

"Confound the rascal! Bring him into the gun-room to me," said the Squire.

When he was presented there "Ned" looked like some animated scarecrow: his clothes had been literally torn to pieces in the fierce struggle that ensued before he was captured. For fear the poor wretch might catch cold through the general airiness of his vestments, his captors had given him a couple of "horns" of the generous home-brewed ale. From the way in which he occasionally placed his hand to his side, giving himself a gentle rub, it was quite evident also that he had received some heavy "rib binders." His two captors had not had all the fun on their side either, for one of them had a lively "mouse" under each eye, and the other mate had his mouth so altered that his pronunciation was very much interfered with.

"So you are here again, you rascal, are you?"

"Yes, I be, Squire, but I wouldn't ha' come if I could ha' perwented it like."

"You told me the last time you were here I should not see you again, if you could help it."

"I meant it, Squire; 'tain't no fault o' mine as I'm here now."

After looking at the man and then at the two under-keepers, with the greatest difficulty keeping himself from smiling, the Squire replied that he supposed not.

"What did he get for the last affair?" he asked.

"Six months, Squire, I'm sorry to say." Here Ned broke in with, "An' if I has another dose like that, Squire, I shan't be a trouble no more."

"Are you married?"

"No, Squire, but I be thinkin' on it."

"Who are you courting, you rascal? Some decent girl, I'll be bound; it generally is so."

"Yes, Squire, you're right there; she's a lot better than I be, or she wouldn't be much."

"What shall we do with him, D——?" But before the head-keeper could answer Ned broke in, "For mercy sake, Squire, make a under-keeper on me. I bin a poacher, an' I be one now, or else I shouldn't ha' bin here. If ye will I'll sarve ye faithful as a dog. Give me this one chance."

Looking him full in the face for one moment the Squire said, "I will."

I saw Ned some months after the Squire had taken him. He was a prime favourite with all, from the head-keeper to the grooms in the hunting stable, and he did his duty honestly and efficiently. As the good old Squire remarked, his doubtful investment had turned out well.

Gentlemen with high-bred dogs, held securely in leash when walking on highroads—the public roads—object to being told by the ignorant Jacks-in-office not to let their dogs get in the covers. This sort of thing at one time would have been simply impossible. Numbers of boards are stuck up on the outskirts of paltry little covers, stating that all dogs found straying will run the risk of being shot. This is simply sickening. I have travelled for miles often without seeing a dog unless I have chanced to come upon a keeper with his retriever or a shepherd with his dog. If these matters were properly looked into I very much doubt if some of these notice-boards have any right to be there at all. I have seen home covers bordering on highroads close to populous villages, the

pheasants, hares, and rabbits dotting about the road like farmyard things, and yet no boards were up to warn people off; and the very numerous school children did not throw stones at them, for the simple reason that they belonged to the old Squire. Where the children were allowed to go gathering blackberries, I have seen more game about than will ever be seen again under similar circumstances.

How creatures are captured I shall not even surmise here; there has been a little too much of the amateur poacher literature about lately. Is it likely that those who have the knowledge will spread it broadcast? But if our readers have the notion that the clever procurer of contraband game is some slouching hob-nailed ruffian in a beer-stained, dirty, velveteen coat and hob-nailed shoes, with a bludgeon tucked under his arm, it will be well to get rid of that idea at once.

In southern counties poaching has become a refined woodland science.

"I wish you would tell me when you are coming," said a keeper jeeringly to one of this class, whom he had tried to capture, but failed. They

had chanced to meet on the highroad. "Do warn me next time you are coming."

The poacher, with fist clenched ready for instant attack if necessary, replied, "I will come to-night, at twelve."

It was a rough night, the keeper did not see the man who had promised to come; but next day one of his under-keepers showed him something that convinced him to his sorrow that the one he had jeered at had been, though not in the place where he had expected him. Thick wits pitted against keen ones are apt to get the worst of it.

A man who is always talking to his friends about having his eye on people, and placing his hands on them, is little heeded; it is the quiet one, that moves about as if, had the choice been given him, he would have preferred the cloisters of some monastery, who is feared by all breakers of sylvan laws. As one who had got into trouble observed, "Them 'ere gentlemen keepers licks ye clean. I'd scarce put the toby in when he says, 'I want you.' Where he come from got over me. I thought as I'd hev a scrap for it, for there was

only he; but, bless ye, that didn't fit nohow, for he warn't half so smooth as he looked, I ken tell ye. He was a good un too, an' no mistake, for he let me off—only I was fool enough to start agin somewhere else."

Over-cunning, also, at times overreaches itself; setting traps in certain places, and springing them afterwards, with rabbits' flick scattered about to indicate a supposed struggle, is not the wisest trick to play, when some people are in the habit of walking through the woodlands—especially when these tricks are played for the purpose of stopping up paths if possible. There is a great deal in everything; but it is apt to be made unpleasant for some when such little games are frustrated at times.

I prefer not to dilate on any of the ruffianly proceedings that have taken place at different times in connection with poaching; the public papers give us more than enough of that. These sketches relate of those who have done the thing for the pure love of it, and chiefly because it was something they ought not to have done. If it could only be known how many, now in very

respectable positions of society, had done a little of it in their time, simply because they could not help it, how much shocked some good people would be. There is a witchery under green leaves that holds people at times. One long-legged, gaunt trespasser in this matter was the woodland clown of the district. His captors had always something to laugh at when they caught him; he certainly was barefaced at times. How many fines he had paid, it would be difficult to say; but the lot would mount up to a very heavy sum. He was otherwise perfectly harmless; for so far as my own personal knowledge went, he never hurt any person or thing except the creatures he went in pursuit of, but very rarely did he miss getting what he set his mind on. One day, just as he had taken a fine rabbit from a flam, and was about to break its neck, some one spoke from behind him—"At your old game, then?" Coolly turning round, the man saw his old acquaintance the keeper.

"What do ye mean about game? this ain't no game, I can tell ye; I'm real earnest tryen my hardest to do good to this poor lunatic rabbit. I was comin' along, and sees him pokin' his head

fust inter one hole, then inter another. I could see he was a stranger, an' that he was shy a-goin' in other people's houses like. So thinks I to myself, if it was anybody but me comin' along you'd git some mischief done to ye. I gits over, where you sees me, to make him go into a hole. I've only tried to do him a good turn, that's all."

"You don't think that tale will answer, do you, eh?"

"It will, if you lets it; you ain't forced to disbelieve it, are ye?"

"What have you got in your basket?"

"My dinner."

"Well, turn it out. Ah, I thought so—pheasants' eggs."

"Only a dozen, that's all."

"That's your dinner, is it?"

"Now look here, keeper, you listen to me for a minute. Of all the tricks that was ever played on a poor innercent feller, this is about the wust. My natur ain't of a savage sort, but if I could drop on the willian as put them 'ere eggs in my basket, I should most likely hurt him with the fust thing I could lay my hand on. They was put there by

somebody that got a grudge agin' me, when I went to find a hole all to himself for that werry rabbit what you has in your hand."

Unfortunately Barnaby's story was not believed, for his veracity at all times was questionable: if he was obliged to speak the truth, he invariably mildly protested against it, as bad form. Like the Heathen Chinee we read of, Barnaby invariably wore a childlike smile on his countenance. When he paid one of his numerous fines he would smile, and say how very hardly some people used him, but he'd "forgive 'em," poor creatures.

Once he was caught with a couple of brace of pheasants. "Yes, here they are, poor things—they *will* come to me. I can't make it out, they will come. But bless ye, here they are, I don't want 'em—they ain't no use to me, you hev 'em." As this offer was made to the owner of the birds, and on the very property where he had caught them, it very naturally roused some dander.

Gudgeon and minnow streams, the children's waters, are closed in many districts, and the sticklebacks in country streams are no longer seen. What is the meaning of this? Something is wrong some-

where. When toddlers fished these streams and brooks, trouts and eels were numerous; now you will not find them. In all the cases that I have known, directly boards were put up by the rivers, brooks, and mill-streams, warning people not to fish under the penalty of being prosecuted, the fish in some mysterious manner disappeared. It is one of the common remarks you will hear in all directions now, "Where are the fish?" Before they were preserved the water fairly stunk of fish, and now they are gone. Many a thing is far better let alone. Poaching—I mean fish-poaching—has had nothing to do with the matter; for, from the nature of the waters that supplied these brooks and streams with fish, it would be impossible to poach them. There are certain waters that can be done nothing with in that way.

Dogs are looked on now with far more suspicion than ever they were, and with less reason. The silliest little muck of a mongrel, that would certainly run away from a rat, is credited with unheard-of destroying powers if game is handy. In fact, near some of the well-boarded coverts to which I have alluded, where far more game is frightened than killed,

dogs are not allowed at any of the cottages round. I have never kept a dog at any time of my life, because my pets have hardly been of the kind that you could expect dogs to live with in perfect peace; but I am well acquainted with the animals, and know a good dog when I see one, especially when it is at work. The term "lurcher" I know is a name of reproach, and yet the best so-called lurchers I have known have been well-bred beautiful creatures. The fault does not lie in the animal, but in the use the creature is put to. The wonderful intelligence, speed, and strength combined, and its silence above all, fits the creature pre-eminently for the purpose for which it is used. I have known some famous lurchers in whom the best greyhound blood in England ran freely; and I venture to state that if any man who knew what he was about was compelled to live in some isolated place where he had to provide himself with food, and he had only the use of his hands and a dog to get it, he would, without one moment's hesitation, prefer that dog to be a lurcher. I have seen some beauties in my time, perfect models of animal form, that had had a first-class greyhound for father, and a very clever

and beautiful collie for mother. No wonder the progeny of these knew something. When I heard that one of these same clever and handsome lurchers had been wantonly shot, I felt as if a murder had been committed.

"I swore I'd shoot his lurcher if I got a chance," said one good fellow I knew; and the dog had been a pill, and no mistake. "One day chance came, and I covered her; but I didn't pull, I hadn't the heart to do it. Her master was in the road, and she was on my side, where I had hid up. I showed myself with my double, but not for fear of me did the man turn white. He was no cur, but he trembled for his dog, for he was as fond of her as if she had been his own child. "I could have done it, Tommy," I said, "but you see I haven't,—she's had one more chance given her."

"Thank ye, master, for not hurtin' her; you won't see us round your beat no more," and Tommy kept his word. Things were better managed then, I think.

One of the most arrant poachers I ever knew, in order to save himself from utter ruin, joined a Rifle regiment. He was the best shot in it; and more than that, he was prized highly, because he

provided the officers' mess, when they were on foreign service, and his own mess as well, with many a game dinner when they were on short rations. The poor fellow fell in action, and those who were left behind lamented him greatly, for they said the best caterer for knick-knacks a regiment ever had was gone—thus proving, in the most direct manner, that if great talents are not fully appreciated in one place, they may be in another.

The hunting instinct is one that belongs to Englishmen, and it has been one of the causes that in past times enabled us, as a nation, to do what we have done,—to hold our own. Colonel Peter Hawker, that rare old sportsman, writing at the beginning of the century, said (of professional poachers): "Perhaps many of those who prescribe laws are not aware that most poachers are in a society, and have a stock purse to support each other, by which means they are enabled to snap their fingers at a five-pound penalty." And again: "It absolutely requires a very old sportsman, who has discovered all the secrets of poachers, to strike at the roots of this evil, *and not legislators, who are worthy of a better office.*"

CHAPTER III.

OLD HEDGEROWS.

OLD hedges are rapidly disappearing from the face of the country. They can certainly be seen lining the road and bounding the fields, but these, with very few exceptions, are of recent growth; possibly some of them may be from twenty to thirty years old. Many of the older ones have been split, cut down, and allowed to shoot out in fresh growth; but this course of hedge-trimming does not afford places of shelter such as the old ones gave.

Our present system of farming on a large scale has had much to do with the destruction of fine old hedgerows. If large fields are required, or if it is thought that they are necessary, the men have only to cut down and grub up the hedges of three or four

smaller ones, and the thing is done, though it does not always prove a financial success.

Many of the old hedges that have passed away are not forgotten, for men whose ages run from fifty-five years up to seventy have the history of these by heart. When they were boys, those old hedgerows were their hunting-ground; and besides this, their fathers had given them records of the same. Two generations of hedge-lore the men had gathered and treasured up.

The more modern hedges are composed of quicker growths, very different from the old ones; for blackthorn, crab, whitethorn, bullace, laced and interlaced with great trailing brambles, formed there thick shelters. Trees, too, at various distances stood like great buttresses in the middle of them—oaks, ashes, and elms. The ground the hedges covered would be viewed with astonishment now, for some of them were double ones, with a deep water-run between, in order to carry the water, in wet seasons, from the upland fields down to the grazing meadows below.

At all seasons of the year have I hunted in the old hedges. And what can escape the sharp eyes of

boys when on the hunt, eager to know all that can be known of the interesting and beautiful things around them—animals, birds, fish, insects, and last, but not least, flowers? When a boy tells you he has looked for certain things and not found them, you need not waste *your* time in looking for them: snowdrops, Lent lilies, primroses, violets, both blue and white—all these, and others in their seasons, were found by us boys for our sisters, or those the boys considered their friends.

If we did not find them in sufficient quantities in one spot, with a shout we would dash off to another. Great handfuls of kingcups and cuckoo-flowers were gathered, to be placed in old-fashioned jugs, with a fringe of glossy dark-green leaves of the kingcups round them: we boys knew where the hedges faced south, and where the meadows were sheltered by these. If the smaller ones reached home without their elder brothers, and with their little knuckles stuck close to their noses, sobbing, the ash-plant oil would be freely administered. But by such as we boys were, the history of the hedgerow sanctuaries, as they once existed, have been handed down: the young life of two generations climbed up them,

crawled through them, and got torn clothes, scratched hands and faces, and then made fresh acquaintance with the aforementioned ash-suckers when they arrived at home again.

When crops were off, the fields and hedgerows came in for our inspection. I was the only one of the lot who owned a natural history book, and that being of the old popular sort, was quickly put on one side: I found that the accounts there given did not tally very well with what I saw for myself. This at the time was a great puzzle to me.

When we found the young of the corncrake dark sooty little creatures, just escaped from their shells, I wondered why birds, which in their habits were so much like partridges, should be so very different in their colouring when they were young! Why should the great shrike come when the other shrikes were not to be seen? These and other matters exercised me much; and indeed they do still at times. On one of those old hedges I refer to, I have seen the great grey shrike looking like a small magpie. Even now in the season, although the hedge has been grubbed for these fifteen years past, the great shrike pays a fleeting visit to

the meadow through which at one time that fine hedge ran.

Bryonies, vetches, the convolvuli, traveller's joy, or old man's beard, "bethvine," thistles, mulleins, and arums, kexes, or teasles, all grew in the hedge bottoms: a wealth of vegetation in the summer, a mass of rich glowing colour in autumn, and in winter the branches were crimson with wild berries yielding food for the birds.

Here the hedge-sparrows built their early nests, also the blackbirds and thrushes, followed by the finches. When the crops were ready for reaping, clouds of birds flew from the corn-fields up to the hedge and back again. Dormice, field-mice, rats, rabbits, and hares sheltered there; as well as stoats and weasels to look after the others: there was room for all.

As I write, a group comes before me, sitting under a hedge, with their poor curs between them, during a driving hailstorm, each one holding forth on the merits, or at any rate the fancied ones, of his humble four-footed companion. The others are now gone; I am the only one left out of that group. Hedges that covered small brooks in, the feeders

that led from the water-meadows to the main stream, were sources of real trouble to us at times—for this reason, they hid so much from us; we could not get what we wanted out of them, although we knew perfectly well it was there. The finest water-cresses and the largest forget-me-nots grew under the tangled thorn branches. How new, how full of interest and mystery much of it was to us in those early years!

One such hidden stream I remember especially well, since, as time went on, that arched-in brook was one of my most valued hunting spots; for on one side corn-fields started, bordered near the brook by fine oaks. In their season wild ducks, teal, woodcock, snipe, moor-hens, and little grebes have all been procured from this place. As the place faced south, and the sides of the brook were steep, when other places were frozen this kept open. Sometimes water-rails made it their home, but they did not stay, for their habitat proper is among reeds and lush water-tangle. Even one place of refuge improved away makes a difference; and when hundreds cease to exist, it makes a very great difference, so far as numbers go, to a county. For all wild

things have their travelling lines, and so well at one time was this known that they were looked for in certain haunts almost to a day, if the weather had been right for them. The great hedges of the grass-meadows, and the corn-fields that adjoined, had strips of rough coarse grass and scrub on each side of them, dented in by the hoofs of cattle on one side and of horses on the other. When the acorns fell, the pigs that were turned out did not pick them all up, nor did the rooks, with all their hunting; for thousands fall and drop into hoof-prints, get covered with leaves there, and are passed over. It is the same with grain in the corn-fields: when the fields are carried, a countless quantity of grains drop from the ears, and are stamped into the furrows by the horses' feet, to be rolled in by the waggon-wheels clean out of sight of all creatures, if the fields remain fallow. When the rain falls—after proper autumn weather has been and gone—the furrows, if the rains have been heavy, run with water. Then the wild ducks come and dabble, spatter, spatter, spatter! up and down the furrows. They sift the grain out; their bills are formed for that. The holes under the trees, also, where the acorns have fallen, get filled

with water; the outer skin gets soft, and the inner skin of the acorn readily slips. Here again the ducks have fine food, to which they are very partial. Acorns that have matured in the way I have mentioned have a very different flavour from those that have just dropped. I have sampled all woodland fruits and berries which are not actually poisonous, and have found out that acorns, like crab-apples, are best when ripened off underneath the leaves.

First the homes of wild creatures go, then their food, and then there is nothing for them but to clear out also. So far as some of our small birds are concerned (I mean those home-bred birds that should be seen all the year round), there is a close time, we know: this the bird-catcher can answer for. But increased facilities for railway travelling now, in all directions, land these gentry in the very heart of districts that a few years ago were as unknown to them as the heart of Africa. Forty or sixty miles from London is nothing to them now, if their catches are good. Permission is readily given by some, for the sake of thinning the small birds off; others resolutely refuse it, because they will not have birds destroyed wantonly. Some men

would kill even a singing lark. I have only missed one bird, in the full sense of the word, and that is the goldfinch. Sometimes for months together we do not even hear the note of one, let alone seeing the bird. The hawfinch, that at one time was thought rare, is in some districts in the country more frequently seen now than the goldfinch.

One class of hedgerow birds I never fail to see in their season—these are the migrants that frequent the woodland hedges. The first to come is the chiff-chaff; and for some little time after arriving this small migrant is silent, as if the journey had been a little too much for him, and had made him feel serious. But after a few days you hear his "chevy, chef, chef, chif!" The notes of migrants vary: when they first arrive they are mostly tired out; then when they get well rested and well fed they tune up. After the little chiff-chaff comes the willow-wren, and he is followed by the wood-wren. Then the sedge-warbler, and the curious grasshopper-warbler; the white-throat, lesser white-throat, blackcap, and nightingale complete the list. All these we can find now, breeding in one woodland

hedge, which is about three hundred yards in length. Robins of course are there also.

Food and shelter are the two chief objects of all insect feeders. As the lush wild growth that hides their nests forms the food-supply and also the shelter for their insect prey, all goes well. Some places are avoided by migrants, because the sour ground there will not allow plant-life to flourish properly. One can tell by the soil that the banks and sides of the hedges are composed of, what birds will be found there in the season. The nightingale, for instance, is very fastidious about locality. I have seen the nests of all the birds above mentioned, both with their eggs and their young. The study of hedgerow life is a most pleasing one, for other creatures besides birds live in and about hedges. It is very remarkable, but about breeding-time the young ones very rarely come to grief through creatures of prey. If you are fortunate, or I will say patient enough to find their nests, you will see the full complement of eggs or of young birds. This may be because these birds build as a rule round the outskirts of game covers where predatory creatures are killed off.

It is a most amusing sight to see young robins stand and look for the first time with open mouths at some little rabbit coming out of their stop, whilst they themselves are searching along the banks with their parents for food. Young blackbirds and thrushes act in the same way, just as if they were utterly astonished to find other young things different to themselves about.

What can surpass a ragged hedge in the month of June—one that has once been "splashed," well banked up, the deep "gripe" or ditch cleared, and then left to make its own wild growth? Some people will go far to see less beauty than they can find at home close to their own doors.

June comes, bringing with it a cloudless sky and great heat. It is the first day of the month, and I am wandering along the hedge that I have indicated. It is a tangle of dog-roses: great masses of rose-colour there are, mixed with honeysuckle; the vine-like leaves of the bryony show here and there; the vetches are climbing up; as to the ferns, they are in all the tender green freshness of early summer; foxgloves, where the sun falls nearly all the day, are in flower, their rich spikes of flower-

bells showing conspicuously. Mothmullein plants are abundant here on the hedge-banks, their cool green leaves looking as if they were covered with the richest velvet pile. They are not in flower yet: they will show their towers of delicate blossoms presently. One of the richest bits of colour I have seen was made up with three cock-pheasants and some mullein in flower. The flashing reddish purple, golden-yellow, and blue colouring, as the birds moved in and out of the soft primrose mullein blossoms and their cool green leaves, was a beautiful sight for one who is contented with small pictures.

Nothing can equal the perfume from wild hedge-blossoms in their dewy prime: there is a mingling of all that is good and fresh from Nature's own distillery.

Mole-heaps show all along the hedge-banks. I think the little gentleman in the black velvet coat is the means, to a certain extent, of turning up a food-supply for the soft-billed birds, so called. The robin and the hedge-sparrow, however, clear the floor at times. They are, in their way, determined fighters when it comes to a disputed point about food. Blackbirds, thrushes, sparrows, and finches

stand on one side if either one of these birds chances to be there. Often have I watched the proceedings, and seen the robin and the hedge-sparrow have it all to themselves, after driving away the others. The robin holds his tail up, cocks his head on one side, and with his bright eyes looks at the hedge-sparrow, standing like a little soldier; the other merely picks at the food, flirts his wings, and shuffles round about, just as it suits him. But these two do not quarrel with each other, for each bird knows well what the other can do.

Although nesting is going forward in full force, as it is yet early in the season the cock birds sing. They do this where there is little chance of their being observed, for they sing within a short distance of their mates. It makes a vast difference on which side of a hedge you go to look at birds. I need scarcely explain this: my readers can easily judge for themselves why. But it is a fact that one side of a hedge may not appear to be tenanted by birds, when the other side is alive with them; for hedge-banks composed of generous gravelly loam, well dressed by the natural top-dressing of leaf-mould, are the favourite haunts of birds in their nesting-

time. We can hear their singing, for the thrushes and blackbirds have rested for a time. The simple act of passing through a gate in the hedge reveals to us a migrant paradise, only one out of thousands which are to be found on the tops of our glorious Surrey hills.

Here is a fine open bit of mossy greensward, dotted, not covered, with junipers, low firs, and magnificent clumps of dog-roses and briars. A belt of noble beeches surrounds it, and this is circled round again by firs. Here the sun shines nearly the whole day long, and the butterflies are flit—flit—flitting all over the sward and dog-rose clumps; here the white-throats are in force, the larger species especially. One throws himself up above the mass of rose-blossoms that conceal his mate who is sitting snugly below, then drops down, almost touching the flowers; he jerks up again, chattering and singing, his crest up and wings quivering. To look at him, you would imagine that he had much to say which was very important, and that some imperative bird-law only allowed him a few moments in which to say it. It is soon over: he catches something, and glides like a mouse with it to his mate below.

That butterfly-like bird, the wood-warbler, sings a half-hearted little song as he flutters over the tops of the beech twigs: he knows that he has come a long way to sing it, and that he has to go back again; and his notes seem to tell you that the sooner it is all over the better he will like it. Then suddenly you hear chipped out, "chiff, chiff, chiff, cheff!" to any extent; and when that stops, the faint mouse-like chirp, or tweet, of the golden-crested wren comes from the firs.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap! that is the green woodpecker "shinning" round and up the dead limbs of one of the old beeches. Then for a time all is still: you can see by their gentle flickerings that a faint air up aloft is gently moving the tender, bright, yellow, green leaves of the top shoots of the beeches, but not enough to make a rustle. The scent from the firs and junipers, mingled with wild roses and clumps of mignonette, which grows here in profusion, appears to float to and fro; one's lungs are filled with the life-giving air of the woodlands; then a bird sings, a loud, full, liquid song, as distinct from that of any other bird as day is from night. The place is filled with it. No matter where or when

you hear it, you will, if you love bird-music, stand still and listen to that weird wild song; for the bird fairly wails: it is a full, rich, wailing chant. On the top shoot of a low fir sits the small dull-coloured singer, his little breast heaving, and his throat-feathers puffed out to their utmost, as he gives vent to his song, whilst his slender needle-pointed bill is opening to its widest stretch. This is the grey and brown, sharp-billed, shuffle-winged hedge-sparrow.

The nightingale and blackcap sing and nest in this spot,—generally one pair of nightingales and two pairs of blackcaps; for both birds to a certain extent are local in their habits. You will take great interest in the song of either of these birds as you pass along, but you will stop to listen to the hedge-sparrow. One gravelly hollow, a very short distance from the place I have been describing, sunk in the hillside facing direct to the south, is a favourite nesting-place for woodlarks. These fine songsters, as their name indicates, are partial to the outskirts of the woodlands; they keep near, but just out of them.

The afterglow of a summer night, if nine o'clock

can be called night, throws a rich glow over the whole hillside. In the distance the Southdown hills show as great lines of purple haze; near to us a rich glow, which is neither red nor purple, creeps and flickers.

As we stand near a large oak watching the fern-owls dashing to and fro, just over the heads of the rabbits that are out feeding, overhead a sweet song trills out from an unseen singer,—the woodlark is singing his evening song, and sometimes it is carried far into the night.

A little below the gravelly pit or hollow runs a wood path, or ride, seldom used for traffic, except when copse-cutting is carried on; the trees at some time or other had been cut and the roots grubbed up to make it. Now you may not see a single tuft of brambles, or torey-grass, before the process takes place; but when such places are cleared a bit for the purpose I have mentioned, these spring up in rank luxuriance. As rough water-runs are made on either side, to prevent them from being stodged up when the rains fall, even in the hottest summers there is moisture, and all things are fresh, cool, and flourishing. Here you can hear the grasshopper-

warbler reeling off his fishing-reel song, and if you keep hidden, very quiet, and restraining, with Spartan-like fortitude, any exclamation when the horrible midges and stout flies bite you, you may possibly see the bird itself.

There is a market for birds' nests and eggs; and if people want them and are willing to pay for them, they can have as many so-called British specimens from the Continent as they choose to buy. Ask any field-naturalist how long he hunted for the nests of the grasshopper-warbler, and the fire-eyed chat or Dartford warbler—so called because the first specimen of this prince of hidelings was procured at that place,—and he will surprise you by his answer.

Summer is over, and the migrants that nested in the glad summer-time have gone back to where they came from. Winter is drawing near, for the schoolboys' "blue-backed game-birds," the fieldfares or bluefelts, have arrived. The leaves are nearly off the hedges, but they make a brave show with the berries, which, when they get thoroughly frost-ripened, the birds will eat. Some ripen much faster than others, so that the food-supply comes in rotation. Some rough fruits and berries can only

be made fit for birds by hard weather; and this is one more example of the eternal fitness of things. The wren chatters, turns his tail over his back, and is very busy near his nest, which has been deserted for some time by his numerous family. Probably the little fellow thinks they may require that snug home again to roost in at night, if the weather gets rough. At present he is only on a tour of inspection, to see if some other creature has been before him, with that same purpose in view. Some creatures that "lay up"—that is the woodland name for shelter—are very innocent and perfectly harmless; others are not so: I have had my fingers bitten at times before I got as well acquainted with wild things as I am now. But I have not yet been bitten by a viper. It is not pleasant to find you have got one of these creatures in a deserted nest which once belonged to a mouse that the reptile no doubt had swallowed, before taking the little creature's home to himself, to live in it for the winter. The dormouse has finished his grass house, and sleeps in it at night; in a short time he will curl up for his long rest. The wood-mouse, called by some the garden-mouse, because it leaves the woods to

feed in the gardens, might easily be taken for the dormouse, unless the tail of the pretty bright-eyed creature was noticed. For both frequent the hedges; the dormouse has his grass nest above, the wood-mouse has his nest below. Both creatures are fawn-coloured above and lighter tinted underneath; one mark serves to distinguish them when they are seen running close to each other—the dormouse has a bushy tail, that of the wood-mouse is finer.

If the hedge-banks are examined now all the tangle is dry and bare—for only the stems of the mulleins, foxgloves, and ferns remain—some of the clever shifts of the migrants, in order to avoid detection, will be seen. There is the nest you took so much trouble to find: you can see now why you did not succeed; for a large root-leaf of the mothmullein hung directly over the entrance to the nest, the nest itself being worked into a root-hollow. There it shows plainly enough now, with the mid-rib of the leaf still hanging there. As to the tree-pipit's nest,—well, your feet have passed over it, without stepping on it, twenty times.

Two keen bird-nesters, who could climb like cats,

friends of my younger days, made it a point to search for a nest that they knew was there, but which could not be found, when the leaves were off the trees and hedges. Then they wondered how it was possible for them to have missed it.

Small roads or tracks can now be plainly seen, where four-footed things have gone to and fro—hares and rabbits, as well as hedgehogs and mice. You can trace all now; before, you only heard the rustle of leaves as they moved beneath them. There is enough rustling too, just now, for the blackbirds are picking and scratching, like so many partridges, among the fallen leaves at the bottom of the still dry ditch. If you startle them with a yell, out they shoot, and over the hedge they go like hawks. When the day is closing they will sound their clear good-night notes before going to roost. Then the woodcocks will come to hunt amongst the fallen leaves, and will find plenty to eat there.

A vast amount of life, varied to a degree, can be found in and about our beautiful English hedgerows.

CHAPTER IV.

ALDERS AND REEDS.

I WAS about to dive down into one of the numerous hollows in some woods which I frequented much, when I was hailed by a stalwart young woodland friend of mine, who was returning from his day's work.

"You be like them 'come-backs' (guinea-fowls) of mine—on the wander again," said he. "If you ain't nothing better in hand, you an' me ken hev a looter roun', arter I've had my supper. You likes out-o'-the-way places an' old tumble-down houses."

"It ain't only the place I wants to take ye to see," said he, when he rejoined me; "that's pretty enough, an' ye'll want to make a pictur of it, I know. But there's more than that,—a mate of mine

lives in the old house—what part of it can be lived in—and he wants to see ye about summut. Marksman has been telling about that there fly ye made him."

There was no right-of-way through the woods, but my friend, as woodman, could go anywhere in the domain, and I, as his friend, might accompany him. A blue-eyed, fair-haired young giant he is, one with whom I have walked many a mile in this district, and not a sound or a sight was ever lost upon "Waggle."

"Listen to the heave-jars; ain't they a-tunin' up?" he remarked, presently. "On that slope, where the copse stuff was cut last year, it lies warm, and the sun is on it all the day near; if there's one heave-jar lays there, I tell ye there's a dozen. I don't meddle with 'em, but now and again I just goes up to see their noovers. They'll sun theirselves just like chickens do, and I've had them flip up right in my face when they've been laying in the leaf-mould or among the dead leaves an' stams. You can't see 'em—them heave-jars is wuss to see than woodcocks, an' they're bad enough. An' yet you'd think you'd see all that was on that bare slope.

An' do you hear they owls a-mewing there, like so many young kittens? The first young uns o' this year they are. Just bide still a moment, an' ye'll hear one o' the old uns bark. Now ain't that like a tarrier yappin'?"

Once more we dived down into a wooded hollow, and we were in front of the old place we had come to see.

"Will that do fur a pictur to paint?" asks the young giant, as he leaves me to look round whilst he goes in search of his friend, to whom he will presently introduce me as "the one who made the Owlet" of great fame. It was one of the most beautiful subjects for the pencil that I had ever seen. There was a great pool of water fringed with reeds, and shut in by the woods, a calm pool, with great masses of weeds floating on its surface, the only clear space being towards the centre. This was caused by the rush of a trout-stream that we could see shooting into it.

The afterglow of evening was on the pond, the trees, and the mill buildings, now falling to decay. The sluice was there, and through the broken sluice-boards the water rushed under the old mill into the

trout-stream, below the rails of the sluice-gates, which were covered with green moss. From some broken boards close to the sloping bank a white head peeped out; from our standpoint this looked like the head of an owl, but the glass showed me it was a cat on the look-out for mice. This place has a peculiarly mournful beauty of its own. The mill and the buildings surrounding it were falling, though the principal timbers, of solid oak, still held up the rest in some mysterious fashion. The whole looked as if a good kick would make it topple over. The roof-tiles, covered with lichens of many colours, had sagged down in hollows. In some parts where it had broken through, the ends of the rotten laths that had at one time supported them showed. The top part of what had been the half-hatch door of the mill hung by one rusty hinge, and through this opening could be seen the ruin inside. Great beams had fallen, and the water was whirling round some, and under others. This lonely, beautiful bit of water had been one of the hammer-ponds when iron was smelted here. And when from some cause the industry fell off, the place had been converted into a mill. Then there

had not been work enough for this, and all had gone to ruin. The mill-house was tenanted from time to time only by woodmen.

A shrill whistle attracts our attention to the house below us, and we hit the boards to frighten the cat, which still persistently pokes her head out of the hole in the boards; then, picking our way very carefully down a flight of crumbling steps, we find ourselves in the garden below—a real old-fashioned one, full of vegetables and those old-time flowers which are now again, happily, becoming such favourites with people of good taste.

In the garden we were met by the occupant of this ruined domain for the time being,—a fine-looking fellow, and a kindly one, who told me he bided there with his old mother. "You'd better look round the old shant'," said he, "before the light sinks."

We found what had once been a fine woodland house in its last stage of dilapidation. The bricks were crumbling for several yards up the walls; the ridge-tiles were heaved up and overlapped each other, at the uninhabited end especially. "These big yews in front of the door keeps our part dry,"

said the young man. The trees had shot up and covered one end of the house-roof. Many a generation had passed in and out of that doorway, between their pillar-like trunks; but they were still in full vigour, with no sign of decay about them.

"Come in and have a drop of mother's old mead," spake our host—"it won't hurt ye; mother makes it out o' honey, jest as it comes from the hive, and that's reckoned wholesome by our folks. Then you an' me 'll go up the pond. I wants to talk to ye about summat. Waggle, here, can talk to mother, an' taste that there old mead again."

We walked quietly to the sluice; then my companion said, "Marksman thought I'd better see if ye was to be got at. There be summat kills the old gal's ducks, not the old but the young uns; they gits pulled under the water, an' no one sees no more on 'em. It worrits her, the loss o' them ducks, an' she will hev it there's summat wrong with this 'ere pond."

"Show me where the ducks get pulled under."

"Why, when they crasses this 'ere broadest bit o' open water, in front o' the slush, to git on that 'ere bit o' boord what slopes down fur 'em to land

like. We don't let 'em stay out on the water o' nights, fear o' the foxes. I've seen two on 'em go down myself, both at one time; not in daytime, but when they come across this 'ere bit fur to be shut up o' nights. I've druv 'em in early to-night. Now Marksman made sure as ye could tell me what it is as pulls 'em under."

"Have you got any pike about?"

"What's that?"

"Why, jacks."

"Jacks?—yes, lots on 'em. I catches 'em sometimes on night-lines, baits 'em with a trout."

"Well, it's just a large jack that takes the old lady's ducks."

"No, can't be that; I've tried fur un all sorts o' ways—with roaches, daces, gudgeon, and trout; it wun't hev none on 'em."

"And yet you say something takes the ducks. Is there any fish at the mouth of that stream that runs into the pond?"

"'Tis just alive with 'em, one sort or t'other. Marksman said as how you'd be sure to know all about it." This the young man reiterated persistently.

"Well, this is what happens to your ducklings: that big jack swims up to the mouth of the feeding-stream, to pick up a fish here and a fish there, just to pass the time till the little ducks, which are a delicacy to him, are on the water. If there is one the right size to suit him, he has it; if not, he goes back to other feed. By-and-by he returns to the deep water, and lies, probably in a long hole in the wall, near the old sluice-gates. He keeps near the mouth of the stream all the day, and is here again in the evening when the ducks come home."

"But how be I to get him?"

"Do you happen to have any sparrow-threshing poles?"

"If ye mean they bat-folding poles, I've got a pair o' them, hard to beat, fourteen feet long, straight as gun-barrels, and tough as wire; regular good uns—you may bend but you'll not break 'em."

Those bat-folding poles fully deserved his praise, for they were a pair of beautiful well-seasoned ground ash saplings.

"Now, what next?" said their owner.

"Some wood-mice," I replied, "if you can turn out any."

"If you means them big uns with sandy backs, white bellies, and long tails, most like sleep-mice, we has a middlin' lot. I be ketching 'em reg'lar with tile-trap downfalls; kills 'em dead they does."

"Now you listen to me: take this piece of new pike-line, there is new snap-tackle on it, very strong too; lash the line round the top of your pole for about a foot down,—you know how; no pulling of it off if you tried,—and to-morrow evening, just before the ducks come home, have your rod and line ready, hook one of your dead wood-mice in his back, drop him gently on the water where the ducks swim over, and wiggle it to and fro. You will have that jack directly the snap-tackle is in him. Haul him out quick; that affair of yours would pull a donkey out."

"Ah, I sees it now; I never tried anything on the top where he took them ducklings from. I'll try that caper fast enough."

After getting my friend away from "mother's wholesome mead," and bidding my new acquaintance good-night, we started on our homeward way; but not through the woods—Waggle sagely re-

marked that the roads were wider. The reason for this choice was soon evident; for at intervals, as we proceeded, he assured me very emphatically that "the mead was as good as any he'd tasted in his martil life." Not only this, but he showed off in various imitative exercises, called forth by the associations of the night. He mewed like the young owls, and yapped like the old ones, finishing up with a long-drawn, tremulous hoot. Then he gave the cry of a rabbit when the stoat is on him; after that the sound of a hare in trouble, shrieking "Aunt—aunt—aunt!" So very natural was this last performance, that it brought some one crashing down into the road from the cover some distance behind us. We were soon out of sight, but Waggle remarked that it would be as well to keep quiet a bit. I quite agreed with him as to this, and we presently parted company, Waggle turning back a moment, just to observe again that "there mead was real good, an' no mistake."

This walk was taken at the beginning of the week, and I had almost forgotten about those precious ducklings, and was preparing to go as usual to my own home in the country town, a good number of

miles away, to spend the Sunday there, when the young man appeared whom I had fitted up with that strong tackle.

"That there caper did it," he cried, with a merry laugh. "I got him right off; he was a real good un. Mother's that glad, she's sent summat in this basket for ye. Marksman was right when he said you was the one to see."

Since my first visit to the lonely pool, as I always call it, I have at different times wandered up and down the whole length of the waters that at last run into the Wey; water-courses that are little known, forming small lakes and great pools, where reeds and sedges grow in rank luxuriance. Nearly all the streams run through moorland bogs. At the present time fish are abundant in these waters, but the fishing is preserved. Wild-fowl, with the exception of ducks, teal, coots, moor-hens, and rails, are occasional visitants. At one time things were different. The snipes do not breed here, for their favourite haunts have been drained. I have a great desire to describe, before they pass away, in the course of changes that are inevitable, a long line of alders and reeds that runs, with breaks here

and there, for miles; this is as the place exists at the time I am writing.

In some of the woodland meadows the streams have cut their way in the most extraordinary manner. In one meadow there are so many zigzags that it looks as if the spade and pick had been at work there; yet it is the natural course of the water, and the result of the wear of ages on the banks. The neighbouring meadow has a straight run through, where the water ripples merrily along, without hindrance. When the streams pass under the road through low arches—as a rule, two in number—they widen out. This is caused by the cattle coming to drink here, from the walled farms that are close to these low bridges. The last of the old families that lived in these ancient farmhouses, generation after generation, lie in the quaint churchyards: nearly all of the farms have fresh tenants. It is truly remarkable to note how many old tombstones have the same Christian names and surnames on them.

By the way, these old farms do not lend themselves to modern improvements very readily; they answered the purpose of those they were built for

long ago, but all those who think to alter old farmsteads to suit the present day and its requirements will be deceived or disappointed. That is the reason so many of them have been pulled down. They have given place to other buildings constructed on modern principles, not so picturesque, but infinitely more fitted for their purpose.

I remember well how, years ago, the farmer's lads would saunter down from the farm to the bridge, and look over the low white rails, apparently at nothing; then one would produce from his pocket a line, which he would wind round his hand, a thin water-cord line it was. As they only had leisure late in the summer evenings, it would be a sort of night-fishing they went in for. About a foot from the hook—a good perch-hook on stout gut—a float was fixed. This was made of a piece of willow with the bark on it—three inches long, the ends stained to take off the staring light colour of the wood. The line was tied exactly on the middle of this, two notches being cut for that purpose. A good big worm was fixed on the hook, and all was ready. The lad would let the line rapidly off his hand into the sharp stream, and the worm, held up by the

willow float, shot under one of the arches. Before it was half-way through, tug—tug—would be felt. There was no need to strike, for the fish, in the act of turning, after taking the worm, hooked themselves. Many a good fry of trout, which had been caught in that primitive fashion, would some of those carter-lads have for breakfast. If two lads were on the bridge, one only fished, the other watched the proceedings; if four of them were there, two went at it—one to each arch. That would certainly not be allowed now, although the trout are in the streams still, and have their hovers under these bridges as of old.

The streams that run through common lands have been fished in from time beyond our parish records, yet I have known men constitute themselves the guardians of such. In one hamlet I often visited, a person who came from no one knew where, rented the largest unoccupied house. Before he had been in the place six months he made himself obnoxious by conceiving the idea that the common stream, under his management, could be converted into a very nice fishing-water for the exclusive pleasure of himself and his friends. He even went

so far as to have notice-boards put up, notifying to the public that all who fished there would be prosecuted. Besides this, he had gratings put up at each end of the run to keep the trout from wandering. To such a degree did he bounce about and "put on side," that some of the dwellers in that small hamlet began to think they must have been doing wrong for years by fishing in the stream. There was a sturdy few, however, who maintained the contrary opinion, and in the hearing of one of these the man was heard to remark that the stream was worth fishing in now, "thanks to his supervision." On one long-remembered Sunday morning, after he had gone to the parish church, three men strolled to the water, carrying each of them a large dish-shaped basket, made of thin strips of wood, capable of holding half a bushel. The mills were not running, and the stream was low, so that they were able to get in the water without much discomfort. Then they frightened the trout to their hovers, and that done, they pushed their long dish-shaped baskets under the banks, and in that manner scooped the trout clear out of the stream. After that they pulled down the notice-boards, and

so settled the matter for the self-constituted trout-preserver.

I have just returned from a week's ramble; it takes that time in the long summer days to explore, as I have been doing, those nine miles of boggy water-courses, from their spring-heads high up in the hills, to the place where they deliver their waters into the river Wey. No matter what these streams run through, alders, reeds, or quaking-bogs, their beds are of stone; not the hard iron-stone of the uplands, which was smelted in and about this district in times past, but still bearing a close resemblance to it. Up in the moors the rills cut their way through peat, in some places three and four feet in depth. The large stones in the bed of the main stream made rare hovers for the trout to lie in; and there are good thick fish, with golden backs, spotted with dark spots and small vermilion ones, having cream-coloured stomachs. Strong these are when hooked, and they make a good fight of it before they are grassed; for the stream swirls, rushes, and ripples along in fine style. In some places the stream follows the main road so very closely that you could throw

your fly, hook and land your fish, without moving from the road; but notice-boards, which in this instance are placed here by those who have a perfect right to forbid trespassers, in very plain terms forbid your doing anything of the kind. There is, however, no need for notice-boards in the parts where the stream runs through alder-bogs; there will be no fear of your trespassing long on these. And yet, in spite of danger, the bogs, the swamps, and the reed-beds, and the huge clumps of tussock-grass that rise out of the water like so many small islands, as well as a wealth of beautiful but treacherous greenery, have been explored in past times by that class of men who, if they wanted a wild creature of some particular kind, had it.

Very few notice-boards were to be seen at that time; they were only, in fact, at the entrance to covers. Sign-posts even were scarce. One lonely road I know, which is situated at the foot of the hills, used to have a very bad name, and not without reason. It is now lighted up with oil-lamps having strong reflectors. Things are certainly progressing in all directions. "The quakes"

were, however, looked after in those days. There were two brothers I often associated with who have now, like myself, laid aside the gun and the rod, for the simple reason that under the new conditions there is no further use for them, who would take a day or even two just to see what was moving there. The mode of proceeding was as follows—having been with that pair more than once, I can tell all about it. As soon as it was dark, the evening before one of these expeditions was to take place, one of the party would walk up to the edge of the swamp with a broad plank an inch thick and twelve feet in length on his shoulder, and hide it in the reeds. Before the early vapour had ceased to rise from the moor, two or at the most three figures would slip through the ash copse, pull the plank out from the reeds, wade up the stream to the swamp, and after that no more would be seen of them for that day. No matter how urgently they might be needed, no one would be able to tell where they might be found. A coil of strong but thin line would be produced. This was sure to be of the very best quality, for the rope-maker—rope-spinner he was called—of their

little hamlet always received very particular instructions when the order to make line for this purpose was given. I remember how he used to assure the men who paid him for it, in an emphatic manner, that it "wud pull a hoss out o' a bog, let alone a man, or a couple on 'em, for that matter." With ash pole ten feet long, pulled out of some tussocks, their equipment was complete. If it was necessary for the men to communicate with each other, they did it in whispers; but as a rule, a sign, a motion of the hand or fingers, was enough.

The pole would be used to probe with in the green weeds which grew in wide patches between the tussocks where the alders were bunched together. I have seen it go down full five feet without its resting on anything solid. Then the plank had to be used; it would be pushed out over the quake, and the lightest of the party would shoot over with the pole, probe quickly, and come back. If all was right, we went over—if not, we tried elsewhere; for we knew that if we could get fairly in the tussock-humps we could look round. How to get there was the problem; but by swing-

ing over on the great alder-limbs that hung low —for many of the large trees were falling, and some already down made a bridge over a few of the worst and widest places—we gained the humps of grass. Hundreds of these there were, a few feet apart; they were more like clumps of pampas-grass than the ordinary tussock-grass, their growth was so luxuriant. Great bunches of marsh-marigolds, masses of them that it would take both arms to encircle, grow in the spaces between the tussocks. Yellow irises shoot up in all directions, and the flowers of the forget-me-nots show in blue patches. These are larger here than they are on the borders of the swamp. There is a mass of colour all about you in the various swamp blossoms, whilst above is the dark-green foliage of the alders, through which you get glimpses of blue sky without a cloud.

For the expedition which I am describing, provisions had been provided, including a large flat stone bottle of home-brewed beer, which was placed in a bog-spring to keep it cool until wanted. In the bag were the solid portions of the refreshments, and two drinking-horns. It would never do to

stop in these swampy localities through a long day, working on empty stomachs; if you did so you would certainly have the "shakes" at night, in spite of the summer weather. Of all the grasses that grow in swamps or bogs, the oat-grass always arrests the eye most. Great sheaves of it are here, and very beautiful it is, for the tassels show a light crimson against the fresh green leaves and stems. As you look at them, you might fancy you were looking at small reeds instead of this great patch of reed-like grass; but as you turn from them to the reeds, you find that the resemblance is only a slight one.

Our leader has gone away somewhere, leaving me buried in the soft centre of a tussock-hump, where I enjoy myself to my heart's content watching the live things that are all around me. I am well hidden from sight, so large is the tussock and so high are the grasses that fall in graceful curves all about the base of it. As I lie half dozing, yet with my eyes wide open, I hear something go crack. Very quietly leaving my nest, I go to see if my companion has got bogged, an accident likely enough to have occurred. But no; before I have

gone a dozen yards over the humps, we meet. Without a word he points with his finger in the direction he has come from, turns about again, and I follow him. Three great humps are near, having about a foot run of deep slush, into which his pole has already probed; and pointing to the centre of this, he whispers, "Look!" There I saw a fox's lair, and the odds and ends of his larder; a very well supplied one it was, too.

"Let's get back tu where you was curled up; 'tis too near the edge of the bog fur chattering here," he whispered.

When we did get there, he "reckoned we might as well hev summut to eat before we get 'lear' like." In the course of our meal, in low tones, he told me he had awakened the fox from a sound sleep. As Reynard looked up in amazement at him, not yet quite wide awake, he had struck at the animal, but missed him; the fox had not stayed for the blow to be repeated.

"He's had a lot of 'Old Kind-hearted's' ducks, ain't he? He've missed a lot on 'em lately; and sarve him right. Last huntin' time they found a varmint up in the covers, and lost him in ten min-

utes. I knowed one, if not two foxes, layed in this 'ere place; and they makes for it over the humps and water. So I tells the huntsman that the one they was after hed trotted off to the alder swamp and layed up there, snug.

"Then Old Kindey snaps out, 'What do you know about it? you ain't been there, hev ye, eh?' So he turns, and sez he, 'Don't you take no notice o' him,' and the huntsman didn't; but he called the hounds, and went tu find a fox furder on. That 'ere fox may hev all his ducks afore I lets him know on't. I shan't forgit neither, the time I cut his reeds fur him. His pond's full o' jacks; but he wun't let nobody fish, nor yet ketch 'em hisself. Reg'lar dog-in-the-manger is Old Kindey. Well, when I cut them 'ere reeds, the jacks had worked up in 'em from the pond, thick lots on 'em. I asks him if I could hev a couple, but he said No; the Squire wouldn't like it if he knowed it. It was in the old Squire's time, mind ye, and he was in furrin parts at the time. That riled me; fur he rents the pond, and the mill, and the rights of fishing is his. You knows how we stack them reeds, don't ye? same as shocks of wheat. Well, I cuts a

lane like in the middle on 'em, and stacks my shocks o' reeds 'longside on it. Then I poles the punt round the other side and cuts, leavin' the medder all quiet like. I knowed a lot o' them there jacks would git up that trench I'd cut. Afore I cum away I claps a couple o' shock afore the mouth o' thet trench. Then I chains the punt up, and if I didn't actooally forgit tu take him the key! I knowed he wouldn't bust the padlock, if he did want tu use her, 'cause he'd hev tu git a new one if he did that.

"Next mornin' I cum 'cross fields way, and brings my hedge-trimmin' bill. Bless ye! you should hev heard him chouter 'bout my forgettin' tu bring him the key o' the punt. But I tells him I waun't used to chouter, and he better draw sum water off, or he could cut his own reeds. I knowed they was all sold, else he wouldn't ha' wanted me to cut 'em; he'd ha' let 'em stood and rot fust. Well, when he'd let off a goodish bit, I gits out the punt—it was middlin' slushy over my knees—and I goes tu cut right in the middle where my trench was out of sight. I gits my hedge-trimmer, and looks in the place I'd cut. Massy! oh, waun't

there a lot o' them jacks, and no room fur 'em to rush about. I hits the big uns behind the head, they was quite enough fur me—the rest could go.

"My father's told me lots o' times as the one afore Kindey wus as bad concarnin' fishin' as he is; and this 'ere young un what's at school now, is comin' along just the same, so I've heerd. But it ain't no use; fish is wild things, and if we wants 'em, we has 'em."

Presently one of the plumes of oat-grass quivers, bows down, and then the stem falls. After that another in the same manner, then there is a stir on the weed-covered water-run—something is struggling to get across it. It is a water-vole, with two stems of oat-grass carried crossways in his mouth. These voles are vegetable-feeders, and all the day, and it may be for part of the night, they are working hard, cutting and carrying.

"Why take all this trouble to get into a dangerous swamp and out again?" some of my readers may ask. It was to see where the wild ducks and the teal came to feed, sifting and spattering with their sensitive bills for the seeds of the wild grasses, and the reeds that ripen and fall in the waters,

over which they nod and sway, springing up there for centuries, beautifying nature's wilds, where all is self-sown. Also to watch the rails as they leave their nests, to slip like rats through the great masses of rich golden-orange kingcup blossoms and green leaves; and to see the moor-hens flit hither and thither, clecking and clucking, anxious that their sooty little young ones should come to no harm. To note the little red-polled linnets clinging and climbing like so many titmice about the twigs of the alders where they breed; and to see the kingfishers settle on the alder branches and the bowed-down stems of the oat-grass. Goldfinches fly twittering through the leaves; coming from the common just outside and settling down for a few moments to drink on the edge of the stream, then away again twittering as they fly. These and many more things took me there, and last, but not least, good trout. "Poaching," you say. No, this was common land.

If a man should be hindered from fishing in any place such as the one I have been describing, even where he had offered to pay for it, or the "Squire" had given him permission, he might just as well

quit the spot at once, for no fish would he get there. There are some still living who remember how lawless men held sway in and about this district until they were hunted down. Very reticent men these were; and there are still some who resemble these in more ways than one. If they give you in their own way to understand that they "wun't hev no fishin';" well, let them alone, and go somewhere else where things are different.

Some of the old low houses, very solid structures, standing just off the water's edge, have histories of their own which would fill a volume; but here we have only to do with the wild things of the woods, the fields, the hills, and the swamps. One old mill which stands quite alone, having a tower on one side of it, which might be that of a church, but without a roof, will be remembered in this locality for generations to come. A bad deed was most providentially hindered from completion by the miss-fire of a gun here.

All these large ponds, we have been told, and I believe the information was correct, were once hammer-ponds in the iron time. Some of the best edge-tool makers are still to be found about this

neighbourhood. Little blear-eyed, thirsty Chubby, of whom I told in 'On Surrey Hills,' lived here, where he had a widespread reputation for his bill-hooks and axes.

Things are, however, changing here as elsewhere, though perhaps more slowly. One great bog is now being drained. I went on the edge of it. I could get no farther; my field-glasses did the rest for me. At last I could see the real bottom: the alders were bending over great rifts in fat black peat, ready to fall, for the water in swamps floats all up. The tussocks that have built themselves up century after century, on platforms consisting of their own decayed leaves, look like great pillars with huge crowns of grass on the top of them. They stand up from the dark peat floor, three, four, and five feet high, still flourishing luxuriantly. If you attempted to walk on that floor, you would certainly go down. When all this was in its primitive state, the leaves of the tussock-grass on those humps trailed in the water that surrounded them; twice the height of a man, you could sink out of sight. I believe that when these swamps are finally cleared, they will come across a few curious things, if there

is any truth in country traditions—and in some of these there is very much.

Where in one place the water, after flowing through the park-lands of a noble mansion, made its exit again by the highroad, it was through the remains of a ruined bridge. The principal arch had caved in, and one end of the bridge had fallen, so that the water forced itself through the fallen masses of brickwork just where it could, and then rippled on as before. This at one time was no doubt a chace, and the fens and meres surrounding it provided an ample store of fish and fowl for the religious establishments that once overlooked the whole of this valley. History repeats itself, and others have recently been built near the old ones. A short distance across country a new religious house has been established, and the vesper-bell is heard as of old, its tones floating over the waters that surround its bell-towers.

When I saw this district forty years ago, it was far wilder than it is now; yet a good deal of it remains in its primitive state still. But the wild-fowl no longer come in their seasons to cover the face of the waters as they once did. There were

rough fields where the snipe and the plover rested, which are now market-gardens in the most flourishing condition. An enterprising individual surprised the natives by renting these useless swamps. Some of them, after having drained them, he dug out, and then he made splendid water-cress beds there, with the natural springs running through them. He found, too, that the poor hungry soil that would only grow torey-grass, moss, and rushes, when it had been broken up by the plough, left for a time to sweeten, and then well dressed with the rich soil from the swamps, fat as it was with much decayed vegetation, would grow almost anything. The rich peat soil he used for the hungry lands that rose above the places he had drained. When he first began his operations, the older folks shook their heads, saying it would never do, for 'twas against all reason, with much more to the effect that "fools and their money were soon parted." They were greatly astounded when this wilderness began "to blossom like the rose." I have seen many market-gardens, but none like these, which he made to bring forth life vigorously in tree and plant.

This ought to be the beginning of the end so far

as these bog-lands are concerned; such an example cannot surely fail to be followed, for it has already paid so well. The very best of garden produce, tons upon tons of it, has gone to market from spots where it seems but yesterday that we listened to the hum and the bleat of the snipe. The change was at first a bewildering one. Strangers are now draining and building here in all directions; and they do well, for there is scenery to delight the eye, hills and dales, woods and waters, such as can be found in few of our English counties. Old mills, old houses, and old trees are still to be found by the lover of these. One comes upon a pool of water, bristling with great sword-like sedges and slim tasselled reeds sometimes, just after a mere bend of the road, beyond one of the new mansions with its trim lodge. Here the pike still plunge, and the water-rail groans and grunts when he hears that sound. He glides and slips along like a rat, as he runs across the floating reeds in front of one.

Poets and sentimentalists have written about the "dismal swamp" and its horrors; here is a sketch of one, as I know it. The alders on its edges are draped with hoary moss; most of them are growing

in the water, or rather their roots have sunk beneath it. They will soon fall bodily into it, as hundreds of them have already done. As you lean over the old crumbling bridge, and look over the pool through the openings in the reeds and sedges, towards the great thickets of willow, sallow, and alder that line the sides of the feeding-stream down to the pool, there is something weird and dreary about the idea that one bend in the road has taken you from the glaringly new to the hoary old. As I passed the trim lodge lately, a smart carriage came out and passed by on its way to the railway station; I could hear the whistle of the engine and the rush of the train, whilst here all was silent save the slush up of a pike in the reeds, and the strange notes of the rail and the moor-hen mixed with those of creatures we could not see.

The particular experiment I referred to has done good in every way; for substantial cottages have been erected where the farmer's cattle were apt to get bogged and smothered. Those who work in the prospering market-gardens and the water-cress beds live in these. And not only that, but there is a change in the people themselves, one much for the

better. They are beginning to see that leaving things as they have always been from their beginning is not the best way by any means. Useless and dangerous places have been converted into valuable property, which gives employment to large numbers, requiring a great amount of labour in spade-husbandry. I have watched these changes with great interest: we have had our day, others must now have theirs. Still, I confess I regret the vanished wild life; and I am not alone in this, for the old companion with whom I used to explore the swamps deplores the loss, every time we come across each other to talk of the days when our blood ran hotly in our veins, and no silver tinged our hair. When I walk over those hunting-grounds again, it may not be through alders and feathered reeds.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN MARCH WINDS BLOW.

CLOUD-SHADOWS flit rapidly over the slopes of a long valley that runs the whole length of the glorious top of one of our Surrey hills. From one of the hill-roads that leads directly to London town a rustic gate opens into the fir-wood. A notice-board is fixed there, giving the strictest injunctions to keep to the narrow track in passing through, on your way down to the long hollow that looks like some huge railway cutting. The banks and the track itself are covered with the finest turf: they run through and over the very crest of the hill, far away to woodlands in the distance. Thorns and furze dot the slopes, here and there mingled with brambles: there are not

enough of them to form a cover for game, but sufficient for the creatures that frequent the slopes of that hollow.

I have known the place for many years, and it is still a famous hunting-ground for a naturalist: there are the same species living there, furred and feathered, which we used to find in that place thirty-seven years ago. It is far from the other places I have written about. At one time I went frequently there, but life's changes have kept me from the locality for very many years. In the course of conversation with a friend of my younger days, whom I met again by accident lately, on one of my long journeys,—he had taken service with the gentleman who owns this fine estate,—I found that matters went on now in the same way that they did when I used to have free range there so long ago.

"Come and give us a look round," he said, heartily; "you are quite welcome: that double-barrelled glass of yours won't hurt anything. The shooting is all over, and there's lots of things flitting about that will please you."

I was glad to except this invitation. I had been

thinking that I must find fresh hunting-grounds somewhere. Yes; I knew that spot when peregrines, harriers, kites, buzzards, all passed over that hollow in the hill. The rabbits that were there in hosts proved too great a temptation for some of them, and a few captures were made. A splendid kite in mature plumage, that had come from there, I once examined; also a falcon in her red plumage that had been shot in the act of carrying off a partridge which she had struck. She was afterwards beautifully set up with her quarry, and I remember very well that so long as the case remained in the bird-preserver's window I spent all my spare time in looking at it. At that period of my life I did not own one single work on natural history; my studies were, as they still are, from the life, only then exclusively so.

The life of a bird and the study of a dead one will give you the very best knowledge, however. A very careful study of any dead bird or animal will show you why they are able to do the wondrous things that man marvels at, being formed for the very purpose they so admirably carry out. The

Great Power that made them perfect, they praise continually, all the time they live, by fulfilling the end they were made for; and the Creator alone understands the mysteries of all. Let scientists bow their heads, for the highest one among them all knows not yet the path of a bird on flight. Patient men, naturalists, devoted to their study in spite of everything, through good and ill fortune, have done all that they are capable of doing to put as much of the real truth as they are able to gain before the public; but much still remains hidden from us.

The study of the Creator's works makes one feel glad to live and to be permitted to know a little out of so much infinite greatness, but also to rest content where we are not permitted to know more. The rest is reserved for us elsewhere. Earnest searchers after nature's secrets in all parts of the world, are trying to discover the great bird-nurseries of some of our migrants. It would take a whole company of devoted searchers, all their lives, to explore the desolate Siberian tundras. Nearer home, within a few days' journey, we have the marshes of Central France and the Spanish

marismas. Even these, when thoroughly explored, will give a vast amount of new information. Inland waters, marshes, lakes, compared with which the once-famed Whittlesea Mere would only be a mere plash, are there to harbour and supply food for hosts of creatures. By the way, why is it that the great reed-warbler or babbler, that looks like a water-thrush, so very rarely crosses the Channel? It is certainly somewhat strange, for he is numerous enough on the other side of it. All birds move about more or less, but some very much more rarely than others—this large reed-babbler, for instance.

I must crave my reader's indulgence for this long preamble, and we will now turn to the birds that are with us when March winds blow. They have lately been blowing till they reach the point we may term a gale, for this has been a "farmer's March" —quite blustering enough to make the rooks hold a noisy meeting on the great beeches four miles away, at the foot of this hill district, where they have nested and roosted for many years. It is very difficult to get at rook records accurately, but there I know they have been flapping, hopping, and croaking and cawing to their hearts' content. But

that has ceased for some time: although March came in, as the old folks say, like a lion, he is just now going out like a lamb. Some quibbling is raised at times, over matters concerning bird-life, that any farmer's lad would laugh at, all owing to folks forgetting that the weather varies so much in different localities. Some favoured spots in our southern counties are visited by migrants weeks before these are popularly supposed to be on flight. They come to this long sheltered hollow in the hill-top; so do the rooks. Father rook has done showing off: he does not throw his tail up over his back, droop his wings, and softly cackle as he presents some choice morsel to the object of his affections; for his courting time is over, and now he has his mate to provide for as she sits closely on her nest. Soft days in March are not to be trusted; we have repeatedly seen the hen rooks sitting, covered with snow, with the cock birds roosting close by the side of them. They do talk to one another then most eloquently: the rook is devoted to his mate; he works and slaves hard for her, from morning to night.

A storm of snow or hail does not kill the young,

as might be supposed; for when the mother bird gets thickly covered with snow, father rook is there on the edge of the nest, with his feathers shaken clear of snow, ready to take her place, with most affectionate gabbles, directly she rises to flap herself free from the falling snow. In less than five minutes' walk from my home I can stand and watch all the domestic arrangements of these very industrious and sagacious birds; and the longer I watch them, the greater is my admiration for them.

At times a favourite feeding-place of theirs gets well worked out. Then they have to take a wider range,—in hard times a very wide one. The rook, in spite of his apparently deliberate movements, is a grand flighter; but his flight is a very deceiving one to ordinary observers, for it takes a good trained falcon to capture a rook in fair flight. No snipe ever twisted sharper than a rook when it was necessary for him to do so. But now, and here, there is not any cause for his exerting himself beyond gathering food from the sunny slopes of the hollow to flap away with to his mate, who is sitting in the beech-trees in the vale below. A bird

possessed of good qualities, which are exerted free of all costs for man's benefit, is the rook.

The beautiful wheatears frequent this hollow, not in great numbers, but a dozen or more pairs may be seen in the course of a morning's ramble. A timid little fellow is the wheatear: a rook passing over makes him dive for shelter under any tuft, stone, or dead leaves that so frequently gather in bunches at the base of brush-growth. His note is very like that of the shrike, who will come presently to the same happy hunting-grounds; the chack! chack! draws your attention to the wheatear, as it does to the shrike. The furzechat, with his black head and red breast, has been here all the winter, also the fire-eyed chat, the Dartford warbler. When the hounds draw for a fox, these are in a state of scolding excitement. The whinchats will come presently. The furzechat or stonechat ought, I think, to change names with the whinchat—for the last-named bird, so far as habits and habitat go, deserves the title far more, in my opinion, than the black-headed stonechat, or furzechat, as it is usually called with us.

The cuckoo, when his time comes, will shout all

day here, and far into the night. I have known him come before his time apparently, for I have seen him shooting through falling snow-flakes. "He's gone again," they say presently; but the bird has only retired to some sheltered cover with a southern aspect, where, warm and dry, he will feed on creatures that have sheltered there with himself. Some of our readers may wonder why all birds do not seek out such favoured spots, instead of starving in hard weather. For numbers such places would be useless. Insect-feeders must have insects in some form or other, either mature or immature. That is why, as a rule, they are found in the places where insect-life exists in a torpid state. If hard weather would kill out some of the insects, it would be a gain—stoat-flies, for example. "Stouts" make their appearance when the leaves are green. A "stout" came in the most gentle murmuring manner and bit a friend of mine in the back of his hand. The place puffed up, the arm swelled, and for two days he was not able to use it.

Legions of small snails cover the slopes. There is a local saying that the reason the mutton from

South Down sheep is so delicious is because the sheep, in closely cropping the fine velvet-like turf, eat enormous quantities of these tiny creatures. These come and go as atmospheric changes take place, although they never go far, certainly: on warm moist mornings and evenings you would crush hundreds at every step that you might take on the turf. Worms come out in thousands at such times; then the plovers are busy. At one time all the poor earth-worm was thought fit for was to go fishing with. Now he is known to be one of earth's workers for man's benefit; and not only that, but he affords first-rate food for a great number of birds, and for some animals.

In hard weather I have found many of the larger birds dead and dying, but never yet a golden-crested wren. Active as ever, he is to be seen inspecting the branches and stems of the firs—snow-covered—where he built his nest in the summer. This little creature, not so large as many of the humming-birds, braves our severest winters—at least in the south of England. Some one may have picked up dead specimens of the wee creature, but I have not done so, although I have been out

and about in winters that the old people very fitly called "trimmers."

The sun shines warmly for March, taking into consideration the height we are at, compared with the valleys below us. The wind hums through the firs with their fresh green tips, and the clouds scud along from the south in bright patches. No great vapour mountains are they at this time, but light flakes of bright cloud sailing along, all shapes and all sizes, in the blue overhead. As the wind comes from the south, it is soft, and just the kind of day for all creatures to exult in after the winter has left us. Over one great patch of the rough torey-grass, so frequently seen on hillsides—grass that snow and frost bleach almost white, but yet leave it tough as wire in bunches, thickly matted—two pairs of kestrels are hovering. They are certainly after mice—the meadow voles; you will find these on the hills where the grass grows rank. These creatures take advantage of bright warm days to come from their burrows underground, and to glide in and out among the tough dead leaves of the torey-grass. This is quite a different movement from the brisk run of the summer-time. I have been close to these mice,

when they were gliding through a tuft, without seeing the whole of their bodies, closely as I watched them, before they reached their holes again. This proves how keen the sight of the mouse-falcon must be to come down from the height he swings at in order to capture a gliding mouse. In other articles I have stated that he is a bird-killer sometimes: why not? He is formed for his work; like the elegant hobby, whose wings are so long that when at rest in certain positions the bird looks like some huge swallow. Small unconsidered trifles form the principal part of the kestrel's food. In another week, if the weather remains genial, he and his mate will be darting and playing antics in the air, before looking for some deserted nest to lay their eggs in. If they go far from this they may get captured; but here, on the estate, as little trapping of wild creatures is done as possible. Professional bird-catchers, those who capture linnets principally, capture the kestrel more frequently than any other hawk. This they do in spite of themselves, for it is the so-called brace-birds (the decoy-birds on sticks) that the hawk comes for. Very rarely does he miss his mark: a flash, and the call-bird

is gone. The visit is sure to be repeated, and the second one generally proves fatal to the kestrel, unless some one requires him of the bird-catcher for a pet. He makes a very nice one, if you know how to treat him. As this domain is surrounded on all sides, independently of its own covers, and the woods are principally fir, sparrow-hawks are in force here, not through being neglected or overlooked by the keepers, certainly—far from it; but the huge rabbit-warren, with its countless rabbits ranging from all sizes, suits the taste of the sparrow-hawk exactly. The warren is open ground, so the hawks can see who is about. The rabbits do not form their bill of fare exclusively — the young and the half-grown rabbits I mean, of course. But small heaps of feathers here and there, close to the wood-side, under some brush-growth, tell plainly that thrushes, blackbirds, and finches have all had to contribute to the hawk's bill of fare. The feathers of the redwing I have seen at times; but the whole skeleton of that bird has been there as well, proving that it had died through hard times in the severe winter, and not from the pounce of a bird of prey. As for the fieldfares,

those gifted calculators of gun-shot distance, that roost in the torey-grass of the hillside like larks, and are now chattering and skirling to each other about their spring visit to Norway and other places over the water, I have never seen one of them, nor the remains of any, that had been killed by a hawk.

There is one wood joining this estate where, from some reason best known to the hawks themselves, they nest regularly. Three, four, and sometimes five nests have been found in this fir-wood, which is only a small one. When the full complement of eggs has been laid, or the young hatched out, the keepers make a raid on their favourite nesting site. They take the eggs, kill the young and the old birds—if they can, for sparrow-hawks are keen and wary birds to deal with. I have known a lot of scheming done before a small male sparrow-hawk has been brought to book. Old females, grey on the back, with their breasts beautifully barred, that look more like small male goshawks than what they really are, will, like the goshawk they so closely resemble, kill anything from a pheasant to a partridge, a rabbit, or a

mouse. These grand creatures watch for their quarry from their perch on the edge of the cover. Pot-hunters, some call them; but this is not fair or just. To see one of these sparrow-hawks dash after a partridge and cut it down is a fine sight for a naturalist, though of course a sorry one for a game-preserver.

Ten or fifteen miles are as nothing to a bird of prey: if in the course of his hunting the bird finds a place to suit him, and has a good kill without much trouble, he remembers it and comes again next day, very frequently bringing his mate with him. Sometimes large estates, owing to complicated questions of law, are not worked for a few years: then is the time for wild creatures to make a settlement, and it is an opportunity which they are prompt to avail themselves of. All wild creatures are quite capable of taking care of number one to perfection, and the real work of a gamekeeper is simply to prevent poaching if he can. As to "looking after things," as the saying goes, none of them require that any more than do the wood-pigeons. I know it is a very easy matter to make any creature that is wild, in a state of

nature, dependent on man, if he takes to feeding it in its haunts. The things will come for food, most surely, for it saves them the trouble of searching for it. Sometimes I have missed hedgerow birds on my rambles by the sides of coverts, and could give a good guess that they had got to spots not far from where the pheasants were fed.

The brown owl, long-eared owl, and the short-eared owl are found on the estate I am describing. Before the present owner had this, the owls were knocked over in the most merciless manner; so all the young covert stuff that had been planted on the bare portions of the hill was killed by the mice eating the tender bark of the young trees. Everything, in fact, had gone wrong together,—a state of complete ignorant muddle it was. But matters are all right there again now, and the plantations are woods, making the best and warmest of covers for all things.

Then there is the woodcock-owl, marsh-owl, or, as he is known in the woodlands, the short-eared owl. Although you will certainly find him in the bents on the sand-downs, the dry flags and rush clumps of the marshes also, he does not confine

himself strictly to either of the localities I have mentioned. The bleached torey-grass of a sheltered hillside suits him quite as well. When my readers are looking at either of the three owls I have mentioned in the Zoological Gardens or in the South Kensington Natural History Museum, I trust they will give them credit for possessing all the qualities they may appear to be deficient in. I have watched them for many years. One of the pets I have described elsewhere—a little owl—was my constant companion when I was at home: in my painting-room, and on my writing-table, often has the fine bird taken up my pen or one of my pencils and gravely examined it, looking the while as if he wondered why I could use either so long without playing with him or talking to him. It seems to me as though the spirit of destruction reigns supreme in some ignorant natures: some would shoot their own mother if they found her with a large pair of wings fixed by some mysterious millinery process to her shoulders. With such, however, we have nothing to do.

If the fieldfare come to grief, it is through the brown owl or the short-eared owl; for the short-

eared owl will run through tussocks like a moor-hen. All owls are nimble on their feet, but some of the more lightly formed ones—the bird under notice is one of them—can run with great speed. The brown owl when on the ground runs like a Cochin China fowl, and he looks not unlike one, with the exception of his head.

So far as rabbits are concerned, they swarm here. In past years I have known them sold at ridiculous prices; and I have also known them carted off, strange as it may read now, to be put on the manure-heap in the Valley farmyard. So no one misses those that are taken as food by the creatures above-named.

A pair of magpies had been here shortly before my visit, but I was told they were not on the estate now. It may not be generally known that in the woodlands this bird is credited with unlimited knowledge of a peculiar kind; in fact, you will hear the folks there say frequently that a couple of magpies are a match for the devil. How they arrived at that conclusion I do not know; but one thing I certainly do know, and that is—a pair of magpies' wings fixed on the door inside, are firmly believed

to have the power of keeping all evil from entering the house. As I respect all traditions, I made no inquiries after that pair of magpies; but I felt confident that their wings were firmly fixed on the inside of my friend's cottage-door.

This hill, and the hills beyond, are of chalk formation, and pools, naturally formed by the hollows that indent the surface, attract the waders and swimmers for a short time as they pass on their migrations to and fro, from the north and north-east to the south and south-west. The farm hands are surprised at times whilst they are ploughing by seeing strange birds—at least such as are strange to them—come from the clouds and settle to feed in the furrows. These will be herring-gulls and terns: the terns are far more frequent in putting in for port than the gulls. It is a strange sight to those who have never lived on the coast; but there is really nothing to wonder at in the birds coming up for a short time to relieve their hunger, and it is a rooted habit that of following the plough like rooks.

A couple of herring-gulls—if you can get them, be it well understood—make a good dinner after they

have been following the plough for a week. Hoodie-crows I have had nothing to do with,—I leave crows on their merits; but gulls I can say something about, for I dined off one recently, and can affirm that the flesh was as sweet and pure as the plumage of the bird itself.

Wild rabbits will leave their warren sanctuary, if they can find outlets to do so, to go to the ploughed fields to make their stops—the homes for rearing their young in. They do this frequently, close to where man is carrying on some of his numerous occupations. One stop I looked at was close to a saw-mill in the woods which had been temporarily set up for cutting the timber on the spot. These shallow burrows, lined with the doe's soft flick, are in some spots very numerous, and generally the doe rears the young all right; but how she enters the burrow to suckle them, or how she leaves it, is one of the sights a naturalist is favoured with but rarely—not once in seven years.

The fox noses them at times, and scratches them out. As to the badger, what could be more delicate for his very accommodating appetite than

tender young rabbits? They put flesh on to his ribs after his fast—often a long and compulsory one in winter. So he digs for them in the most business-like manner, just like a mole. He knows where they are exactly—his nose tells him that—and in less than two minutes the fore-part of him is buried; all you will see will be his hind-legs working vigorously, and a lot of earth moving. But he gets his rabbits; hungry stomachs are hard to reason with. The badger is, I know as a rule, nocturnal in his habits,—so is the fox; but where the places that they frequent are quiet and secluded, they will at times hunt by day for their food. A vixen and her mate at times reverse the order of things: like humans, woodland wild creatures are governed by circumstances.

I have at different times met with the fox and the badger in spots where I certainly did not expect to see them; and when I have gone where, according to my reckoning, they ought to have been—so far as locality could be relied on—they were not there. Very contradictory experiences one has in looking for wild things.

Occasionally a couple of curlews will drop on the

uplands in some great field, or on some large bare piece of sheep feeding-ground; but very rarely do they get shot, for the curlew's tactics are very puzzling to those who are only accustomed to shoot pheasants and partridges. He is far more troublesome than profitable as quarry for the gun. Get at a curlew on a bare ploughed field, or on a sheep-walk, if you can. The stone-curlew, the Norfolk plover, or thick-knee, stays on this hill for a time when his season comes. He is as wary as his sickle-billed namesake; once in three or four years only, a specimen gets shot. This certainly says much for the bird's acuteness. When I first knew this place, years ago, a bittern located in a swamp hollow at the foot of the hill. The bird was not shot; it was driven out of its covert by the villagers at the foot of the hill, for making the noise that it did at times.

The whole of this line of country, even at the time of writing this, is intersected by green roads, some of them old highways, long since disused; but the greater portion are green roads or tracks that run over the hills and at the foot of the hills, by the woods and through the woods, over heaths and commons, but always in some dip or

hollow out of sight of the ordinary run of travellers. They start direct from the coast—from Portsmouth to London through the New Forest, and from Brighton to London through the Weald, which is crossed and re-crossed in all directions. From the heart of the Weald itself—Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex, and Kent—a network of green lanes runs. The purposes they were once used for are now forgotten, at least by the rising generation. They may have chanced to hear of these when they were children. Contraband or smuggling at one time was a notorious fact well known to all who lived in the country mentioned. The Pilgrims' Way is quite distinct from these green rides. Those who are not well versed in the roads might get mixed somewhat; but to all intents and purposes the Way the pilgrims travelled of old is as plain to trace still as it was at the time they went by it to visit Thomas-à-Becket's tomb.

I will conclude this chapter by mentioning some of the birds and animals to be found where the Way runs at the foot of this hill, by which the river Mole winds with a course as twisting as the nose of the little animal from which it takes its name.

It is too early for birds to nest in March, as a rule. Some have young by the middle of the month, but this is exceptional,—only with a few species does it occur. All birds, however, are moving about, and some of them are showing themselves off bravely. Even the jay's voice is softened as he raises his crest, droops his wings a little, spreads his tail out, and gabbles to his mate, who no doubt considers the whole performance a most enchanting one. By the copse-side the pheasant struts in the bright sunlight, his ear-tufts erected, and his crimson cheek puffed out, his breast shining like burnished copper. He has not put all his war-paint on yet, — his full toilet will be completed presently. But he is getting himself ready for battle, and for conquest too, for the pheasant can fight with a will. Overhead, the wood-pigeons clap their wings, spread their tails out, and float above him. The moor-hen visits the dead sedges, flirting up his tail, bobbing his head, and clucking. Presently his mate joins him. A cock moor-hen is a very handsome bird at this season, for his plumage, although sober-looking at a short distance, is found to be very rich when you have the bird

in your hand. The scarlet shield above the base of the bill, and his brightly tinted legs and feet, claim attention, if he is only a moor-hen. To casual observers these birds would only appear to be aimlessly picking, poking, and clucking about; but this is a mere ruse on their part,—in reality they are looking out a spot for their nest. The pair that claim our attention just now had a nest in that particular sedge-bed last year, and they intend to have one there again, if all goes well, this year.

About the water-rail, just before breeding-time, I have a few words to say. A more hideling feathered creature than he is at other times you could not meet with; but just before the actual time for nesting comes round he actually swaggers. Whether it is because he has nothing to fear from pike just now, I cannot say; but there is the bird daintily walking along the edge of the reeds and sedges, flirting his tail, picking and poking, running nimbly hither and thither, then standing still to flirt his tail again, and go on as before.

Water-rails are fairly numerous in the river-tangle on the Mole,—in fact, I have seen more

dead birds than I liked, which had been shot in the winter-time. About this I have nothing to say, but it proves that more of them are about than people think. I like to see the quaint bird, and to hear him grunt and squeak. Presently he will be heard and not seen; for when the young are out of the nest, both parents, like the moor-hens and the coots, will have to beware of pike. For these by that time will have fully completed their arrangements for a future supply of pike, and will be coming back with voracious appetites and full sets of teeth to the sedges and reed-beds, to snap young water-fowl. Waders or swimmers, young ducks or teal, grebes, coots, moor-hens, and rails, all are liked by the hungry pike, and down they go. If the pike are large, the older birds come to grief; but these are very cautious, and keep their young chicks in the most shallow and dense part of the beds, where the fierce fish are not able to swallow them, because the water is too shallow for the fish to work their way up.

The little grebe, or dabchick, is very busy now, making his arrangements for his damp nest, although he will not actually begin it for a week or more

yet. He and his mate are enjoying themselves, at any rate, diving here and there, rising from the water and flying at a great pace round and round, all the time they are on wing uttering a series of sounds like the creaking of a rusty hinge on a wooden gate. This is what the grebe's love-song sounds like to me, and I have heard it many times. He is a merry little fellow, and has given me many hours of profitable amusement at various times and seasons. When the bird does sit upright, and runs his bill over his satin-like breast-feathers, he always puts me in mind of a good-tempered, fussy little man trying to unbutton his waistcoat.

The crested plovers, the lapwings, seek the upland fallows now. It is most amusing to see the lapwing play up to his mate, for he runs up to her and bows with his crest raised, runs round her, cries "Pewit," softly, "Pee-weet-weet," lowers his breast to the ground, works about as if he was on a pivot for a few moments; then up he springs, mounts high up, and comes swooping down, causing his wings to hum again, crying, "Pewit—Pewit-weet-weet-weet."

Gradually the haunts of woodcock and snipe are passing away; all that are known to me now I could count on the fingers of one hand. Shooting has not been the cause of their decreasing numbers, it is the present system of drainage. Their feeding-grounds are breaking up in all directions. I have just left one of the old haunts and breeding-places for woodcocks, but not for snipes. They have left it as a nesting-site, although a few come to feed there at times, not very frequently. The woodcocks, a few pairs only, remain to breed in certain quarters; but they will not be found there very long.

Fir-woods and hills are in the distance, covered with brown heather, lit up for a short time by red clouds that follow the sinking sun. Nearer to us is a large stretch of high moorland, dotted over with thick clumps of low firs, scrub-oaks, stunted birches, and heather. The soil is as varied in character as it can well be—gravel, sand, peat, and large stones cropping up, a jumble of soil and vegetation. Brown heather there is, old and tough, as well as young shoots of heath springing up in all directions under the cover of the old heather;

patches of whortleberry-shrubs in rank luxuriance, that will make cover but bear no fruit—they are too thick and high for that; rush-clumps and moss, torey-grass and the finest green turf; small shallow pools where the rush-clumps grow, and patches of quaky ground of all sizes, also of various degrees of moisture. So far as a feeding-ground is concerned, there could be no better; but half a mile below their old nesting-place—a wood covered on its slopes with beeches, oak, fir, thorns, and bracken, not to forget huge holly-clumps—a fine mansion has been built, timber felled, roads made, hill-quakes drained, and water conducted from the moor above to supply the mansion below. When all this actually reduced their nesting-haunt to quite half its dimensions, no wonder the birds became few in number. The few pairs that come about there now keep to the top of the wood on the fringe of the moor.

The brown owls hoot, and hoot again. From the wood, with lazy flapping flight just clearing the low trees on the edge of it on the moor-side, a couple of birds appear. From their flight, any ordinary observer would take them to be a pair

of owls on the hunt, so very owl-like at this season is the flight of the woodcocks. As the birds clear the trees for the more open moorland this flight alters, and in the evening light they look like two hawks buffeting each other. No owl-like flapping now, for they are tilting. This is the play of the woodcock just before nesting. The bird must have moist feeding-grounds, but his nest is, as a rule, placed in a dry situation.

There is very little done now in the way of tealing — that is, springeing for woodcocks: the birds are not numerous enough for that in this district. Drain-pipes have had the same effect in the decrease of woodcocks and snipes as they have had in causing fowl to leave the moorlands. The woodcock is a very interesting bird; as regards exquisite pencilled plumage, he takes the first place. After him, in the matter of delicate pencilling, come the wryneck and fern-owl, goat-sucker, or heave-jar. As things are now, we never expect to be asked to look at a woodcock running about with her chick on the edge of the moor again. The way that the bird conceals himself—if squatting in dead leaves can be called doing that—is

marvellous. One or two handfuls of scattered leaves and a bit of dead bramble is enough for him. Not much has he to fear from any prowler of the air; for if a hen-harrier—a bird very rarely seen on the moor now—should by chance sight him as he squats, his tail is spread out like that of a fan-tailed pigeon, and he ducks his head. If the sparrow-hawk, hunting for food for his ravenous young, sights the cock flitting through the trees, whilst he sits silently watching on some limb close to the trunk of a tree, and gives him a chase, he has his pains for nothing; for the long-billed, full-eyed, swift-winged bird shoots, twists, and doubles in and out of the network of branches and twigs with such lightning speed that the hawk has no chance of a capture. The first bit of cover the cock sights below him he dashes into, and is lost to view.

For weeks I have been out in all directions, over the hills and through the hollows at their feet, over commons and through moorland-bogs, as far as I dare go, and in all places something is going on. Changes are taking place, and others are threatened. Fir-woods that at one time were

sanctuaries for wild creatures are such no longer. The blackcock, the black-grouse, has left them, never, I fear, to return. Where only narrow woodland-tracks ran through, and the stems of the furze-bushes were covered at the roots with heather, heath, and whortleberry-shrubs so thickly that on summer nights I have rested there, most luxuriously, on a green couch of nature's own providing, wide paths have been recently cut in squares. I mean, the fir-woods are intersected by wide tracks as though they were allotment-gardens. Even the jays, one can see, are disgusted with such doings. What a vast difference there is between heath and heather! Heather makes, with its delicate blossoms of blush-white and purple, a garden of the wild moors; heath, when it is breast-high and old — very old and wiry — causes one to exclaim forcibly if, to put the thing mildly, one has to force one's way through it. It flies back and switches you in the face most unpleasantly.

At one time I could find snipes in any meadow that had rills running through it, natural drains, within five minutes' walk of Dorking town. No

one thought about going farther than that for snipe-shooting, and very fair snipe-shooting it was for a woodland district. I have seen the birds close to dwelling-houses and railway stations. The meadows were used for grazing purposes. One little fellow I knew, ten years old, went out with his father once to beat snipes up. Child-like, he was all eyes and ears for the sport. The boy's parent was a good snipe-shot. Not many minutes had he tapped about under his father's directions, for snipe at times can be almost trodden on, before up got another long-bill with a scape, scape, scape.

"Look out, father! what's that?" yelled the boy. Bang! and the bird dropped.

"Go and pick him up, my man; you know where he dropped." Off darted the youngster in high glee to the spot, looked, and went back to his father with a long face, saying, "It ain't a bird at all, father, it's a great striped toad; it squats there, an' I can't pick it up."

When the snipe dropped, it had placed itself in the usual attitude for the purpose of concealment before life left it; the position of the bird

and the light stripes on the upper plumage made it look very toad-like. So very closely does the snipe's plumage fall in with withered herbage, that you might be the length of any ordinary room from one and yet not see the creature. But the snipes have gone from those water-meadows, and so have the fish.

The otter, one of the greatest ornaments and the most interesting creature that the river Mole still can boast of, will be in fine form in a week or two; for what with eels just getting about, frogs, rabbits, and other little items, he will certainly whistle for pure gladness of heart, because for him the winter is past and gone.

In the sheltered willow-holts the little chiff-chaff chatters as yet feebly his chiff-cheff-cheff-chiff, chevy-chevy-chevy, chiff-cheff-chiff. On and about the old trees in the park the "yaffle" yikes, and the nuthatch sends forth his liquid flute-like call; while the wryneck, just arrived, chatters out a half-hearted peet, peet-peet, peet-peet! He will find his voice presently—and make good use of it.

On the topmost limbs of the dead and dying trees,—for most of these old woodland giants for

which this park is famous have nearly lived their life out,—the two species of black-and-white woodpeckers execute their curious kettle-drum solo, or we might say their side-drum rolls. Through the woods and over the river the pied drummers are heard. Tap, tap, tap! then comes the roll executed with faultless precision; tap, tap, and the roll again. So loud is it that the hare frolicking in the field sits up to listen. When March winds blow is the time for their most joyous performance; whilst those who watch Puss just now see that "Mad as a March hare" is a proverb not without reason.

CHAPTER VI.

WHERE GRASS IS GREEN.

A BRIGHT morning in the pleasant month of May finds me in a moorland water-meadow, which I have reached from the hills above it. On one side runs the highroad, bordered by a few sleepy-looking old-world farmhouses and one or two cottages equally ancient. Pollard willows are dotted along the line of the stream, which flows with many a curve and abrupt turning; and from the stream little rills branch off, to form finally a very small pond, which is fringed round with rushes, and lies close to the road.

Here two children, a boy and a girl, are busy; their school satchels are slung at their sides, and they are enjoying themselves in the interval be-

tween a very early breakfast and lesson-time. The girl sits and holds a wide-mouthed bottle ready for "the robins"—for by this name the youngsters call the sticklebacks—which her companion is catching by means of a worm tied round its middle with a thread. The youngsters tell me they are going to take the little fish to "teacher," who has got a big glass box with water in it an' green weeds an' robins. They look grand in it too, she adds. Quite a subject for one of Birket Foster's pictures of country children these are.

I have seen a great many fish in my time, but in my opinion there is no other so pretty as is our little male stickleback in his nesting season. He is lit up with crimson, golden green, and silver; the small fellow seems literally afire. And indeed his looks do not belie him, for a more fiery and pugnacious little fish never moved in water than the stickleback at this season.

It is near school-time, and as the children get up to go with their prize, I pick a large cool leaf from a bunch of marsh-marigolds and place it on the top of their bottle, and then pass over the meadow. No spade has ever touched this soil,

dark and rich as it is; all the earth-turning has been done by moles. They abound, and bushels after bushels of earth that would grow anything has been heaved up by these powerful little animals. The soil gets spread about by the cattle that feed here at times, and it forms a rare top-dressing. Beside these little rills titlarks, or meadow-pipits, nest; you may see one of the birds looking at you as she sits not a yard distant from the spot where you stand. The smoke curls lazily from the chimneys of the cottages, which are just within the woods close to the meadow; birds are singing merrily, and life of all sorts is in full swing.

From a moorland bank at one end of this meadow a considerable fall of water rushes into the stream: it is one of the numerous outlets for the water from the moors above to the moors below. As the fall is about four feet in height, the continual run has formed a deep hole, just large enough for a man to stand and turn round in. At the time I speak of, a certain kingfisher was in the habit of perching on a spray that nods just over this little pool; he is there this morning. Kingfishers

are not easy birds to watch, but as the pollards stand close to the fall of water, we may manage to get sufficiently near for our glass to bring him into such close view that it seems as though we might stroke his bright blue feathers if we wished. What a picture it makes, this pure spring water as it tumbles down the fresh green of the young tangle that surrounds it! But on no canvas could the bubble and the sparkle of it all be reproduced, as the water winds and leaps round about and over the moss-covered moorland stones; whilst the swallows dash up and down the stream, over the meadow, and back again.

From some tree in the woods close at hand cuckoo! cuckoo! cuckoo! is shouted out; the willow-wrens and the chiff-chaffs add their little notes to swell the harmony; a little further down there is the swirl and ripple of the brook. The kingfisher is still there, and if I am not mistaken, good trout are in the bubbling fall beneath him. Now he plunges, not into the middle of the pool, but just on one side of it, for little fish gain their strength in shallow water that runs sharply. What he has got we do not see clearly; it is a fish of

some sort, however, and he begins to whack it about before he swallows it, after perching again on his favourite spot over the fall. No bird lends itself to the bird-preserver's art with less satisfactory results than does this flashing bright bird, so full of active life. Indeed, he is difficult to set up, difficult to paint, and hard to watch. If you wish to see what the gay creature is, you must see him alive.

At one time a broad cart-track, made with heavy logs, ran over the stream in this meadow. One end of this has slipped from the bank, and the whole is under water. This naturally caused some obstruction to the course of the stream; the water rushed under it, scooping out a large hollow. As I stand looking at this, birds are for the moment forgotten, and I seem to be stretched out on the edge of that bank once more, as on evenings long past, with a stick about four feet in length and a good gut line, having a nice red worm at the end of it. This I gently drop in the water above those planks, and allow it to float down. Swish! comes something from underneath them — but, ah, the rod, like the gun, has long since been laid aside!

A walk of eight miles through beautiful green lanes brings me at last to one of those water-mills, which look as though they had been built for all time—a large building of stone and brick work, now moss-covered and weather-stained. It is quite closed in by woods, so that it cannot be seen from any of the main roads; you might pass near it hundreds of times and not know that a mill was there; and as it stands in a hollow, the sound of the splash, splash, splash of the great mill-wheel is shut off from the ear. A tide-mill it is, and a navigable canal having locks runs up to the tumbling bay of the sluice. Three miles below it there is another mill, but a much smaller one. The first of these has been a mill of note in its time; and indeed an accurate account of it is given in the Domesday-Book. There are others of the same type to be found in this county. In this case dwelling-house, farm-buildings, and mill stand together, and are equally well and solidly built—a combination which is not often seen.

My work on one occasion led me to stay some time in the neighbourhood of this mill, and as in my childhood I had been well acquainted with tidal

mills and their workings, it was of great interest to me to wander about the place during the long summer evenings when the business of the day was over, and in time I got to be very intimate with the occupiers.

The mill, like others I have known was built over arches. Flounders and eels were the fish caught below the mill, and in the streams and ponds above it, trout, pike, carp, tench, and roach were abundant. Angling clubs were not thought about at that time, and the railway had not yet reached it, as it has since done, waking up the folks a bit, and bringing down proficient anglers by the score to fish in these prolific waters.

The place was far enough away from the tide for the water to be brackish only. As the miller said, it had only a "smatch"—taste—of the salt, which did not prevent some very fine trout from frequenting that tumbling bay. All these tidal mills have histories, although you will rarely get the owners or occupiers to talk about them. No class as a rule are more reserved; if one set of men more than another have the blessed faculty of minding their own business and looking after it, millers

have. In past times this was not without good reason; indeed there were spots about their mills, which, if any little venturesome snipes of boys were found prospecting near, perhaps laying their heads together to go under one of the grim arches in search of "crow-fish" as they call the stickle-backs, they had good cause to remember it. I write now of things that we dared not have hinted at in the days of my boyhood. I can do it now, for the owners of the mill, and those who were wont to bring burdens that had travelled further than from the adjoining farms, have long since passed away.

A scene of the olden time comes back to my mind's eye.

"Ain't you a goin' tu hev that 'ere alder-copse o' yourn cut, neighbour? 'Tis gittin' most oncommon high and thick like."

"Well, I dunno 'bout that 'ere; fur ye see that 'ere thick alder-copse runs up to the mill-door, and it keeps my garden loo"—sheltered from the wind. "If it waun't fur that 'ere copse bein' where 'tis, I reckins as I shouldn't git the craps of reddishes as I do. No, I shan't hev it cut, not in my time,

I tell ye; it ken grow till it all falls inter the bog."

"No 'fence to ye, on'y they tells me they're givin' a middlin' figger for hoops jest now."

"Ah, well, I be thankful tu say as I ain't druv for money; so that hedge will jest bide where 'tis for my time."

A fortnight later the cottagers who lived near the mill were much disturbed by accounts of "a most unairthly sight" that had been seen by old Shadrac, the miller's man, who looked after the cows and kept the house-garden in order. He had been up with one of the cows that was ailing, he said, and when he came out of the gate close to the alder-copse of which we have spoken, "figgers on hossback, with flaming soords in their hands, had actooally cum near tu where he stood rooted to the ground with fear like." Then they had vanished. "There waun't a sound to be 'eerd frum un," he said. When he had summoned courage to look up again there was nothing to be seen. He added, too, that the sight had "frittened" him so, that he had been in bed for nearly two days, shaking with fear, and that his master had been over

two or three times a-day to inquire after him, and to talk the matter over with him.

"Massy oh, an' save us! what is the world cumin' to when figgers like that 'ere was 'lowed tu git loose and walk the airth?"

When this much-valued gardener and cow-tender got about again, and the cottagers near pressed him for fresh information on the subject, he simply told them "as how he didn't want tu hear no more on't; he had got over it, by a marcy, and let it goo."

The real version of the affair that might have been given by that nice old man Shadrac, had he chosen, was as follows: On the particular night in question, eight pack-horses, each carrying a heavy burden, and ridden by men who carried cutlasses drawn ready for the worst, had come along towards the mill. The hoofs of the horses were muffled, each man having his own set of mufflers, which he put off and on as emergency required. Old Shadrac had been very busy working for hours, under cover of the darkness, making a breach in the low bank, which, when finished, he filled up with a double-wattled hurdle, plastered with mud. This had been pulled on one side by him as the horses approached,

after they had entered the copse he replaced it; and as the riders did not return in the same direction from which they had come, the old humbug had had plenty of time to mend up the bank and to work himself up into an edifying condition of fright.

One thing I knew well as a boy, although we never talked of it—some of those tidal mills had large square openings close to the sides of the great wheels, and a trap-door in the floor above opening on to them. Apparently these were there in order that, when they swept up the mill-floor above, all the dust could be swept down by that way into the water below; but I have heard some of the old men and women chuckle together, in later times, as they hinted at the uses to which some of these places were put.

Although I have spoken lightly here of what might be called the more harmless side of contraband, it is certain that there were some in our community who carried dark secrets to their graves with them. It was wonderful, though, how these "unairthly sights" ceased to alarm the folks after the new police regulations came into force.

"You're here, then," my very wide-awake young friend Tommy remarks, as I reach what he calls his fishing-place,—a weir on the river where he has a trap for catching eels. "Why didn't ye cum afore? them black and white drummers don't rattle away in the poplars now same as they did a while back. Their drummin' time is over, I reckon;—no, not quite, there's one at it now. If we get in the boat-house and hide, you'll perhaps see him with your glasses. Them old poplars is half rotted; them black an' white places is funkies, musheroom things, an' holes."

"I wish I could see it, Tommy—I can hear it well enough."

"I could ha' had a cock-bird fur ye last week. But bide up here side o' me a bit. Old Poll Nine-eyes wunt be lookin' after me agin fur a good bit, fear o' another eel crawlin' up her jessymine, an' gettin' in her best room."

"What nonsense have you got in your mind now, boy?"

"Well, you see she's bin a bitter weed tu me. They do say as she was crossed in love when she was young—long time that ago, I reckins; and

that's why she spends best part o' her time lookin' after other people. She was a wusser to me afore that 'ere eel got into her best room, just after it hed bin spruced up for the summer. Old Flint, he has the right o' catchin' all the eels and t'other fish in this part o' the river, an' I works for him. 'Tain't much o' pay, but I makes it suit me. I has all the frog-mouthed eels,—there ain't none too many of them; he has all the sharp-nosed silver-bellied uns.

"People cums for the fishin' here, an' they pays old Flint; then I puts them over in the punt, an' they pays me fur that. She told him as she'd had her eye on me for some time, an' that I was takin' advantage of him. A nice man old Flint would be to play with. But I believe she was tryin' to make up to him; he's lost his missus a good bit now. Well, one day she told him that I'd ketched a bushel o' fish with rod and line, and that I'd sold 'em."

"Had you done that, Tommy?"

"Course I had. They was all big bream; I baited that big deep hole close to us for three days afore I started fishin'. I got a lot, but I

didn't know as she was watchin' me. I got over it all right with old Flint, but I paid her out. I ketched the biggest frog-mouthed eel as ever you see, an' I kept him in the well o' the punt a while o' purpose for her.

"She was feedin' her bantams one mornin' at the back o' the house, an' I see the winder o' her best bedroom up a bit at the bottom. So I goes quick to the punt, gits the eel, slips up the garden path, drops him in the room, and slips out again quick. It waun't long afore I heard her givin' tongue, full clapper. She'd gone into the room an' found that 'ere eel tangled up in her long white winder curtains. She got him out of that somehow, and then he crawled all over her carpet an' twisted hisself round the legs o' her table what she rubs with a old silk han'kercher.

"Then the old gal throwed up the winder an' hollered as if the house was afire. Old Flint was comin' down for the night's ketch. She called him in, an' he ketched the eel for her an' brought him out. He give him to me, and she see him do it, for her garden-hedge jines the boat-house. She said I'd put the eel in, but he told her 'twas

nonsense to talk like that, for the frog-mouthed eels was all the perks as I was 'lowed to hev, an' I couldn't afford to throw 'em inter folk's winders.

"Her room was mucked all over, an' she did give tongue. But she ain't watched me since then; perhaps she's feared another big eel might crawl up her jessymine an' in at her winder agin."

I thought that I knew nearly all there was to be known about the fern-owl, rightly so named; for the waxen-looking cool green brake and the bird are almost inseparably connected. But here again I have had my spirit humbled, for recent visits to a fern-owl and her young ones, during the last nine days, have proved that one can learn something fresh from the same creature every time one is fortunate enough to be able to make a lengthened observation of it. In the early part of June of the present year, I was slowly walking over a portion of one of our beautiful commons, and as I crossed the main road that ran through it to get on the sward again, a sheep-track through the fern caught my eye; this I followed for a few yards, close to the side of the road. A dead thorn-branch

lay across the track; to avoid it I stepped round a bush, when up flapped a fern-owl, almost under my nose, and it dropped down in the fern in front of me. I looked down; there was nothing to be seen except a small bare place where a furze-bush had been cut, leaving the dead carpet of dry furze-needles underneath. This small patch was as bare, so far as any purpose of concealment was concerned, as the sheet of paper I am writing on. At least so I thought.

Just as I was moving away some bits of chalk caught my eye—or rather there was one piece of chalk, the others, on looking close, proved to be the broken egg-shells of the fern-owl. Close to the fragments lay what looked like a short, crooked bit of dead furze stem; as I was bending over it I saw the supposed bit of crooked, withered stem move ever so little, so I stepped back very cautiously, for I thought I saw the back of a large viper that had half buried itself in the hot dry furze, and I wished to find out which way his head pointed; for in spite of all my captures, which had been hitherto safe ones, I knew well the penalty I should pay if I blundered. Once more I looked,

and this time at a glance saw what that semblance of a crooked bit of furze stem really was. Two young fern-owls about three days old were there; they squatted in the hot sunshine, looking most curious creatures, covered with down and long hair-like bristles, patched and spotted with dingy brown, dirty yellowish-grey, and stone colour, in exact mimicry of their resting-place; the bristles round their young gapes were very thick.

They knew instinctively that some strange creature was looking down on them, and they crouched, keeping their crooked position, lower down in the slight depression which their movements or their mother had made in the dry needles, till they looked more like a bit of crooked dry stem than ever.

Leaving them, I made a slight circuit to find the mother, which did not take me long to do, for she was in the road squatting, with trailed wing and outspread tail, looking like a grey stone. "Chack, chack!" she cried, as loud and as distinctly as any fieldfare, with short beats of her wings held downwards. Never at any time were they raised as they are in the ordinary flight of the bird; her tail also was inclined, and spread

out like a fan. Five times I put her up, and she repeated the "chack" with the same manœuvres each time. Then she was left in peace that day; but from time to time, for nine days, I visited this most interesting family. Very cautiously did I peer round that bush in order to watch their domestic arrangements. The young ones grew apace, but they never moved from the spot they had been hatched out in. Like toads, they had hollowed out their resting-place so that their backs were almost level with the top of the dry furze-needle litter.

One day the mother-bird was fast asleep, hovering her two chicks, not for warmth certainly, for the spot where they lay was hot in the daytime and warm all through the dewless nights. To all appearance there was just a tuft of dead furze lying, as you may see thousands of tufts in the course of a mile's walk. As I bent eagerly over her, to observe better one of the most perfect and harmless deceptions I have ever seen, one of my feet just touched the dead thorn-branch already mentioned. For one moment a large dark eye met my own, and then there was a "flip" and a "chack,"

and the bird was gone. The very last visit I paid them their feathers were coming fast; but never at any time did their position, sleeping or waking, give you the least idea that the objects were birds at all.

I venture to say very little escapes my notice when I am on the root; but that hen fern-owl did twice, although I was looking down on her resting-place within a yard of where she was crouching. I did not see her until she dashed up almost in my face. The hen-bird is much lighter in her markings than pater heave-jar; in fact a beautiful and intricate mingling of dull brown, dull ochre-tinged grey, and soiled whites compose the tints of her plumage.

I have tried to the best of my ability to give some idea of my new experience concerning this beautiful and extraordinary bird, but no words of mine could reproduce the exact picture of one of the most perfect bits of natural mimicry that it has ever been my good fortune to witness. It is not often that a field-naturalist has the opportunity of studying at his leisure a family of fern-owls, or, as they are locally called, heave-jars, for so long a

time as I have stated. I made sketches of the three, and of the place they rested on.

"Well, Charlie, have the nightingales brought their young out all right in that tuft of ivy that hangs over the bank on the side of the road?" I ask a young, broad-shouldered lad.

"Yes, they're all right; the old birds have got 'em out in the copse: they're flyers now, a nice lot on 'em there is. There's some chance now perhaps o' hearin' nightingales again, since my boss, old Cricket, dropped on them 'ere London bird-catchers. That warn't a bad stroke o' old Cricket's, was it? No, it did a power of good."

Cricket, or old Crick, as he was more familiarly called, missed hearing or seeing numerous nightingales that frequented one very beautiful spot in the grounds. Thinking they had been cleared out there, he made for another favoured spot where he knew them to be, and hid up in order to watch.

He had not been quiet long before he saw two men coming up the coach-road: his retriever was with him. When the men arrived they unpacked their clap-traps, baited each of them with a meal-worm, and placed them on the ground under the

shrubs. It does not take long to trap nightingales. And this was the talk the keeper heard, as he related it to me one day when I met him on his rounds.

"This is about the best place, pardner, as we've fell in with, if you ask me. Did yer hear that? why, they must come in regular famblies; we've just copped another, I heard the trap go down."

"They must be reg'lar chawbacons in this 'ere part o' the world; they only wakes up once a-week, and goes to sleep again directly. The last one we've copped makes eight on 'em; we'll be up in the smoke before two o'clock, we ain't more 'an half a mile from a station."

"Right you are, pardner. Why, look here, if we could have a run of luck like this for a week, we could start a regular knock-out o' a bird-shop in fust-class style with the pieces that these bloomin' nightingales would fetch us. We ain't done bad as it is. A most good-natured swell the party must be as owns this property, to let us come an' ketch 'em an' no notice took on it. We'll pick up our traps now, pardner, an' go before we does see any on 'em about. But if you ask me, there ain't no chance o' sich a thing takin' place here."

"Oh yes, there is," a voice replied from behind them, and the keeper stepped out and placed his hand on the nearest one's coat-collar. His "pardner" rushed forward to release him, but stopped short; for the keeper had shortened his hold of his stout holly staff, and his retriever stepped forward, looking very wicked. "Now then, stop that! It's no use; down with your traps and cage; don't let me have to tell you twice about it. Open the cage and let them all go; you have caught them all here. I've been watching the pair of you from the time you started trapping. Now bring your traps and cage to me, you will never use them again."

"What's yer goin' to do with us now, guv'nor?"

"Why, follow you down to the lodge-gate, and give you in charge."

"Now, look here, guv'nor, have you got any kids o' yer own?"

"Well, yes, I have; but what's that got to do with it?"

"Not much perhaps, guv'nor; but both on us has got kiddies at home, up in the smoke, an' if you does what you says, both our lots o' kids will have

rough dues before we gets back to 'em again. Just think on it a bit, will yer, for you've had the drop on us heavy like."

"If I let you go, will you promise not to come here again?"

"Yes; it ain't likely, considerin' the way you've bowled us over, as we should feel the least bit inclined to."

"Very well, you can go; and the next time you hear about chawbacons waking up once a-week, don't you believe it."

I was speaking to one of my rustic friends about the fish being dropped about in the fields, away from water. "Ah," he said, "that ain't nothin'; them 'ere herons is right down artful; they've had a roughish time on it lately, all this 'ere burnin' heat. The fust showers we gits, off go them herons again: they knows all about it; 'rectly a freshet cums down the stream an' gits in the ponds, out clutters the fish from the holes where they've bin hidin',—like mad things they are, rollin' an' wrigglin' out o' their senses for pure joy; they gits anywheer, most special if the water runs over the grass. Them herons gits sumthin' then. An' when they flaps

over the fields with their pouches full o' fish, them 'ere sparrer-hawks that sets on the fir-tops waitin' for the young pigeons to come out for their first fly, gits a sight on 'em, an' goes fur 'em. They can't hurt 'em much, but the herons gits frightened an' chucks out some o' the fish. That's how fish gits littered about.

"Come on along o' me, I got sumthin' to show ye, not ten yards from here, right in the path. What do ye think of that now for a bit o' bird-plasterin'? Ye ain't a-goin' to pull that out,—look here!" Hooking his middle finger into the hole, he pulled with all his strength, but nothing moved. It was where a nuthatch had plastered a hole up, where a limb had rotted, in order to guard her nest of leaves below.

"I calls 'em tree-climbers. Bit of good work, ain't it? She must ha' gone a middlin' distance to git her mud an' stuff sich weather as this is, eh?"

The hole so cleverly plastered up, on examination proved to be enough for a man to get his arm in up to the snoulder. It was breast-high, and faced directly on to the path—in fact, it was impossible to pass by it without brushing the bole of the beech

in which the hole was. But the bird had so cleverly imitated the colour and texture of beech-bark, leaving a round hole just large enough for her to enter, that you might have passed by it every day and not have noticed it, unless you had seen the old bird go in or out. You could see her eggs through the hole, and the young after they were hatched, for they were not molested. Wary as the bird is, she, like others, preferred to nest close to a frequented road.

For some reason or other which it is impossible to conjecture, some animals, and many of the wildest and most suspicious birds, will persist, in spite of all efforts to deter them, in making their homes as close to humans as is possible.

A vixen has had her cubs this year close to a noble mansion, and to a well-frequented bridle-path. I have passed it every night and morning all the time she has been there.

Those who had the right to do so dug her out of her earth, but the cubs were not large enough to shift for themselves, so they turned the lot down again. That very night she shifted them all a mile and a half away to some large rabbit-burrows.

Then when some of the men of the estate went there to do some ferreting, out bolted the lot and went back to their first earth. They have left it now; for after they are able to eat meat without help, their mother takes them out in the open—that is, they make a place to curl up in whilst they are receiving instructions in the art of thieving and killing from the vixen.

Here they will be in clover for a time; but cub-hunting is drawing near, and that lot of young foxes will soon have to make use of the instinct of self-preservation so largely developed in their family.

Even the fawn and white coloured field-mouse, or garden-mouse as he is very properly called, must need leave his sheltered domain and make his nest on the edge of the road. Sixteen men passed over that little creature's nest morning and evening without trampling on it. If I had not seen one of the young ones, in the old one's absence, come out of it for a walk, I should never have suspected it was there. It was a most clever structure, its very exposed situation being its chief safeguard.

CHAPTER VII.

BRITISH GAME-BIRDS.

OUR game-birds have been so exhaustively written about by competent authorities, that if the present chapter treated of sporting matters I should feel diffident about offering it to my readers. I do not propose to give more than some notes by a wandering field-naturalist, whose delight it is to watch the habits of those creatures that by good luck may come in his way,—a delight unmixed with the slightest desire to kill any one of them.

The *capercaillie, wood-grouse,* or *cock of the wood,* is the king of his family. He was at one time a native of the pine-forests of Great Britain, lingering on in Ireland until about the year 1760, and in Scotland

he was recorded up to 1780. In 1827 or 1828 attempts were made to reintroduce him into his old haunts, with the result that the grand birds imported from Sweden were successfully established in Perthshire in 1837, and they may now be considered as fairly plentiful in the numerous localities suitable for him. As the capercaillie bird naturally frequents the fir-woods of large extent, he flourishes best where these as a rule form the principal timber trees; yet he is also found in oak and brush coverts. Owing to the large size of the bird, ordinary observers, seeing him suspended with other game-birds in some game-dealer's shop, might think it a very easy matter to bring him down; but this is not the case: his plumage, which is coloured with grey, warm brown, and that of his upper breast with dark, bright green, falls in so well with the trunk, branches, and foliage of the tree he perches upon, that he rushes down, and swoops up and away, before a shot can be fired at him. Snap-shots are frequent when capercaillie shooting. He moves about on the ground a great deal at certain times and seasons in quest of the various berries which form the greater portion of his food;

but he feeds largely on the tender tips and shoots of the Scotch fir-tree, as well as on the wild berries peculiar to fir regions, and the green tips from the varied undergrowth, with insects and worms. The bill of the bird is a most formidable one, fashioned more like that of a bird of prey than that of a grouse; of this he can make good use to defend himself when necessary.

When the ancient forests were destroyed, at least the greater part of them, in order to kill off the wolves that were so numerous in the time of Queen Mary,—it had been necessary in the winter to provide shelters where those who were forced to travel by night could take refuge from them,—the capercaillie with other forest creatures suffered. Those mighty forests were destroyed principally by fire; a small portion of some of the older ones remain, just enough to show of what mighty trees they were at one time composed. Red-deer, boar, wolves, foxes, martins, roes, wild-cat, as well as the birds, from the goshawk to the capercaillie, had to shift their quarters. And besides this, early invaders fired some of them in order to root out those determined inhabitants of the land who had taken

refuge in them in the hope of escaping from the conquerors of their land.

A few trees having been felled, the resinous sap oozed out freely, and the wood fired when the wind was blowing in the right direction. Then the whole forest was on fire. Unless one has wandered in old fir-woods (we mean those that are now called old), one would hardly credit how resinous it all is,—it oozes down the trunks, dropping off in great half-fluid tears of resin on the fir-needles, which are dry as tinder, and from a foot to a couple of feet in depth; snap a bough off, and you will see how it will bleed "turcumtine," as the foresters have it. No wonder the fire rages when it once gets hold. I have seen this on a small scale when it cleared the hillside; and excepting for the whortle-bushes and brambles, that hillside is bare now.

Birds of the same species, and even birds from the same brood, vary greatly, and the capercaillie is no exception to this; for there is as much difference in the size and weight of these birds as there is in large and small turkeys. To illustrate my meaning, last year, 1892, I had the good fortune to purchase one of the finest cock capercaillies in

full breeding plumage that I have ever seen or can hope to see. All those who saw him said that he must have been one of the giants of his race. The bill of that bird was as large as that of a small golden eagle, and it looked quite as dangerous.

The hen capercaillie is very small in comparison with the cock-bird; if the plumage was not richer than that of the grey hen, the female of the black-cock, it might easily be taken for a rather large specimen of that bird. As a game-bird for the table, opinions vary about its merits. I have eaten capercaillie with which I certainly could find no fault, but if a common barn-door fowl had been on the table, I should have gone for the fowl. He is a noble bird to look at, and when he plays up to his sober-coloured beauties, he is most interesting. I think that it is a fact to be proud of, from the natural history point of view, that the cock of the wood can be found once more in our midst.

The *black-grouse*, which comes next in importance to the capercaillie, is to be found more or less in any wild grounds that are suited to it. In some

of the southern counties year by year he has been getting scarce, yet it was not so a few years ago, and it is to be regretted that things have come to such a pass as they have done. But when some men rent shootings, they are not contented unless they kill all they can—for reasons best known to themselves. At one time the black-cock and grey hen bred freely where I lived for a time on the mossy moors. Even the old woodmen felt proud of the birds, for they would come and show off closely enough for them to see all their strange antics very distinctly. They knew well the difference between a couple of woodmen mending a splashed bank and two men with a gun and dog after them. Even when the axes were at work timber-trimming, and the chips were flying, they never heeded the sounds, but would come sailing down from the great warren fir-wood to play up on the bright green velvety turf of the moor. "Massy alive! cum up airly along o' me to-morrow mornin' an' ye'll see 'em dance. Git up when I do, 'bout half-past four, an' git sum breakfast fust. 'Tis a good hour an' a half's walk from this 'ere shanty o' mine. We has to go middlin' up hill

and down dale, to where they cums to cut their capers."

It was a clear morning, and a soft one for the middle of March, as we stepped out on the sward from the little garden-gate. "When the sun gets well over the hill and shines on the slopes, it will suit them well," I observe.

"Jest about, I reckins," says my companion, who is as usual gaitered right up to his thighs; "most likely we'll run up agin summit o' sum sort afore we gets there, goin' through the pasture-woods, if we keep our eyes open. It wun't be long afore it gits middlin' light."

There was life in the air and life in the fresh sharp scent of the fir-woods, and even in the leaf-mould, the decayed and decaying fir-needles, which would soon be covered with the young growth of whorts and heather. Rabbits scuttle away at the sound of our footsteps,—that is all the intimation we have as yet that other creatures besides ourselves are stirring.

"Hear them 'ere magpies," said my companion, presently; "there's a couple on 'em gittin' into mischief soon as iver 'tis light enough fur 'em to see;

they're harryin' a thrush's nest. Don't the old uns holler,—they'll hev 'em out on't; reg'lar thieves is magpies. I wants to git one, but they ain't easy to git hold on; only old hosscoper[1] Jack has got one roun' here, but he's a sight more cunnin' and artful 'an what his master is, an' that's sayin' summut."

We were in a long narrow valley between two hills, only one out of many; the district is a succession of hills and dales, with water at the bottom of all. Not a sound was heard there, and nothing living was in sight in the air above us nor on the ground below. The fresh sharp breath of the morning was heavy with all the odours from the trees and the fresh tangle beneath; for even in hard winters you will find all things growing fresh and green under the shelter of the firs.

"I allus thinks as 'tis whisht like," said my companion, "the fust thing afore the sun climbs the hill. When he gits roun' the side, he'll light them 'ere firs up, an' fall on the slopes—an' then, if they ain't flighted over the t'other hills, we are most sure tu see 'em. I'll go an' git my tools out o'

[1] A fraud of a horse-dealer.

the brake where I hides 'em afore they cums over; they wun't see me: they're shy things is black-game—oncommon shy if they cums on ye suddin like. Now you git in my brake shanty, behind this 'ere old thorn, an' keep yer eyes open."

In front of us, for some hundred yards or more, was a clear space of moorland hollow, one of thousands, clear of all trees, but covered with the richest and thickest moss that it is possible to find in any county in England; emerald-green it is, tipped with lemon colour, and pale rose and warm golden brown, cotton-grass bents shooting up through it. Patches of dark peat are there, dry and crumbling, the dead heather roots showing like a grey network through the dark-brown soil. Straggling bits and bunches of thorns, dead and withered, covered over with moss as grey as the dead bits of thorn they cling to; stones are scattered all about, not in heaps or wild disorder, but a few here and a few there, with wide spaces between them, the outcrop of the moor, weather-stained and lichen-covered, in pale greys, drabs, and sulphur yellows. Then, again, are rush-clumps, red-brown at their bases, and the freshest of greens at their

tips,—all growing bright, fresh, and vigorous in nature's wild moor, garden, or waste, call it which you will, though it is surely far too beautiful to have the name of waste applied to it.

Now all is glistening in the sun for some distance; a part is broken up by sandy patches, where stunted birch-clumps, about the size of currant-bushes, try to grow. Raised a little above these patches are bits of the finest and shortest turf that ever was nibbled by our pinwire dotters. "If they're comin' at all, they'll be here now the sun's up, to cut capers on one o' them 'ere bits o' fine turf," says my friend. "Here they be!" Yes, there the grey hens were, round their black prince, picking about just as if they had seen all his performance before, and were not much impressed by it—at any rate not this morning. But the splendid fellow went through it all: he bubbled and crooned and wheezed or sniffed to perfection, with his curved tail over his back, his wings trailed, and his neck inflated and stretched out just as if he must do it or die in the effort. Then springing up, he commenced a general walk round, crooning and bubbling as before, his wattles look-

ing like bits of cloth from a soldier's coat,—about as full of his own importance as a bird can well be. "That 'ere's a werry nice tale he's a-tellin' to them 'ere hens, an' they believes it all, I'll warrant. There they go! What moved 'em? Look there! there goes a fox; why, he nearly had one on 'em."

As I have observed elsewhere, increased population, with the draining of boggy lands, has made the black-grouse scarce where they once were plentiful. In Kent, where they once used to be numerous, none now breed. In Surrey and Sussex they were reintroduced early in the present century. In the New Forest they have never been extinct; and they are fairly plentiful on Exmoor. There are some to be got in the moorlands of the Midlands. In Scotland the bird is distributed generally.

The young birds are very fond of ants' eggs and other insect food. In spring they favour the catkins and twigs of birch, alders, and willows; later on the tops of the heather furnish a diet; in the autumn the various moorland berries are enjoyed. Then they visit the stubble-fields, having an especial liking for barley. In winter the

tops and green buds of heath, whortleberry, and cranberry plants are what they mostly live on. Favourite haunts of the young of the black-grouse are the moist, swampy, rush-covered moors, where they can feed on the juicy rush seeds.

The *red grouse*, Scotland's own bird, is one of the gamest birds on the list; although suspended from the game-dealer's shop, he appears as merely a red bird with dark markings, and white flecks here and there, the feathers all ruffled anyhow. Becky, becky, becky, beck, beck, beck, c'm back, c'm back, c'm back! I hear as I tramp over the moors,—no gun, only a trusty staff in hand; for I am just a lover of nature wandering over the heather before the sun has cleared the early mists away. C'm back, c'm back, becky, becky, becky, back! and then, gock, gock, gock!

Birds with clean sharp-cut wings dash hither and thither through the mist,—these are golden plover; for they, with their small companions the "plover's pages," the neat little dunlins, as all grouse-shooters know well, frequent the haunts of the red grouse. The heather is in flower, for the twelfth of August is drawing near, and all the

wealth of moorland vegetation is in rank luxuriance, scenting the air. Although the warm heavy mist is rolling slowly away here and there, nothing a few paces away can yet be seen very distinctly; but moorland mists come and go at times very quickly, and it will be clear presently.

Once more the call rings out, C'm back, beck, beck! The sun is well up and the mists float away; there is the wide moor in all its dewy freshness, and the grouse show here and there, on knolls, on stones, and on little open spots, where stones crop up and tufts of vegetation are scattered about. These spots are dry and warm, for the sun falls direct on them. There at least is one brood within range—the hen grouse, with her well-grown family, who will soon be as large as herself; they are easily made out by their lighter colour. And there is the cock, a bold brave bird, one that every Highlander blesses as he hears its call. Head held up, his scarlet combs erected, and tail well up over his back, his rich dark chestnut plumage shining in the sun, his dark under parts with crescent marks of white, in fine contrast with the grey littered patch he is

standing on,—he gives out his call of C'm back! It may be that some bird of prey is about, or that the bird may be giving his fearless challenge to others not seen by human eyes; but there he is with his family, one of the handsomest game-birds of Great Britain.

Grouse-shooting I shall not touch upon, so much has been written on the subject by veterans who have shot the moors when they were young, as well as when their hair turned grey. One that I am proud to own as a friend and as a fellow-naturalist, belongs to that band of veteran grouse-shooters. So far as the present chapter goes, it matters little to me whether the grand game-birds are shot over dogs, or if they are driven birds; whether they rise and twist like snipes, or if they lie like stones. If they cart well on clear frosty days, or if they will not cart at all, does not concern us here. There is a special literature devoted to grouse-shooting, so I need only touch lightly on the natural history of the birds. Grouse-shooting certainly is the means of distributing vast sums of money in different directions among all classes, wherever the sport is carried on. I have called the grouse Scotland's bird. Taking

a broad view of the matter, I think this is not far from the truth; but the Border counties are well sprinkled with them; and though the red grouse is now confined to the northern counties of England—Yorkshire is at the present time famous for its grouse-moors—England can fairly claim the bird at present as one of her own.

A well-set-up active figure comes up before me, one of middle height. In his best days it would have taken a good man to have withstood him. His grey eyes even now are as keen as a hawk's. Older than myself he is in years, but fully as active. On the bonny brown moors I see him with his couple of famous setters. The dogs find: they are a perfect couple, and know their business well. Their master draws up, the birds rise, October grouse going away like the wind. His keen eyes glance along the barrels, two reports ring out, and a couple of cock grouse clap their wings together and fall stone-dead on the heather. This is sport, the poetry of sport.

The eagle, the peregrine, the harrier, and the goshawk—also the fox, wild cat, marten, and stoat,—all these kill the grouse when they have opportunity. The vipers, too, that swarm on the moors, kill and

swallow the young grouse chicks as long as these are little. They are only fulfilling the law of natural life, according to which one creature in proper proportion forms the food-supply of another. It matters little in what manner they are killed. The birds of prey do this, as a rule, instantly, and the predaceous animals effect it with one bite. I have made this a special study, so I can speak as to it. And a good shot drops them in their tracks, whilst there is small chance of the creatures being killed by a bad one. He will miss them altogether.

The *ptarmigan* might be called the snow-grouse, for he lives and flourishes above the heather. Bare rocks, hurled together in wild disorder, and capped with glistening snow, are the places where ptarmigan flourishes. There, compared with other game-birds, he lives without molestation. The bird has three distinct changes in the colour of his plumage in the course of twelve months: in spring, autumn, and winter these are. The changes are very remarkable ones; if we attempted to describe them, it would require more space than can be given here. The ptarmigan's spring would be when we were

having our summer, for the seasons are late in the mountain districts of Scotland.

At different times I have seen a fair number of these birds; indeed any one wishing to see the changes of plumage I have mentioned, can see them in the South Kensington Museum of Natural History. Thousands of so-called ptarmigan come to this country; but these are really willow-grouse in winter plumage. They are larger than real ptarmigan. A cock ptarmigan can be picked out from any number of willow-grouse easily; for the ptarmigan has a black streak running from the base of the bill to the eye, and a little beyond it, which the willow-grouse has not. Some have risked their lives in order to be able to give the life-habits of the ptarmigan to the public; others have spent large sums to enable them to see the birds on their nests, and to see them with their young. If they had not done this, those who do take some interest in natural life and its surroundings would not have been able to see what they do now, close to their own homes in London.

One of the noblest of the game-birds that England

at one time could call her own—the *great bustard*—has passed away. This magnificent bird could at one time be seen in England; for the large bare spaces at that time and the early part of the last century that were to be found in so many counties, were the haunts of the noble bustard. Some of these were Wiltshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Sussex, Cambridgeshire, Yorkshire, Berkshire, and Kent. As the cock-birds ranged from 15 lb., 20 lb., to 30 lb. in weight, they were sought after and finally exterminated. The Bird Preservation Act was not in force then. One of our records of the past, which is rigidly authentic, tells us that a keeper in Norfolk used to look for their tracks in the snow, and then feed them with cabbage-leaves. The tender heart-leaves are enticing to other birds beside bustards. When they had fed well up to the bait, he constructed a hide, put down more tender leaves, well within shelter, and also within shot-range. Then he placed a concealed battery of duck-guns, pointing dead on to their feeding-place. When all was quite ready, he tied strings to the triggers of the guns, carried the strings back to his hiding-place, put down more feed, and waited. The noble birds,

having so often had a good feed from choice tender green stuff, fed up to it as unsuspiciously as domesticated turkeys would do. When they were well within range, the keeper gathered all his strings up very gently, and pulled. Nine bustards fell to one murderous discharge—only one discharge out of many; but this was the greatest number he ever got at one time. When it is taken into consideration that hundreds of birds were killed in lonely places,—their minor haunts, so to speak, remote from their noted and well-known haunts,—it is no wonder that this stately and noble bird, the noblest without exception of all our British game-birds, was exterminated. I am well aware that at intervals, few and far between, bustards have visited some of their old haunts, but only to be killed there. There are other gentlemen, however, who, when these birds have visited their estates—all honour to them—have done everything in their power to preserve them.

H. M. Upcher, Esq. of Feltwell, near Brandon, when he was in the fen on January 24, 1876, was told by one of his men that a strange bird was about; and on going to the place pointed out he saw a fine cock bustard. The bird allowed him to

look at it for a short time and then rose, flying round him. This gentleman at once gave the most positive orders for the grand bird's protection. Lord Lilford heard about it, and he most generously offered to send a hen-bird from his magnificent aviaries to turn down as a mate for it, hoping that it might be induced to stay. This latter, through misfortune, was found dead in a deep dyke or ditch. Again Lord Lilford, on hearing of it, offered to find another hen-bird, which offer was gladly accepted, and the hen was duly turned down; but the cock disappeared and was seen no more. When game-birds go, it is a difficult matter to get them back again, or even to get them to stay for a time.

The bustard plays up in the breeding season. He holds his head up, puffs his neck out, while his feather whiskers stand out well away; his tail is held up and outspread like a fan, and the wings are half drooped. So he prances round about, a noble bird to behold. Like other game-birds, he plays up even when confined in aviaries—and these are now the only places in England, I am sorry to say, where you can see the bustard do this; for

all practical purposes, in this country the bird is missing.

The *little bustard*, a dwarf compared to his giant relative, is frequently met with in the eastern and southern counties,—frequently at least compared with the larger bird I have mentioned. There is no necessity for our going into details as to its general habits and habitat, these agree with those of the great bustard. Taking into consideration the risk they run when they do visit us, the wonder is that they are found at all.

The *pheasant* is a thoroughly naturalised importation. At the present time nearly all our pheasants are more or less crossed with the ring-necked species. The so-called old English pheasant is very rarely seen now. I do not think this is of much consequence, for the crosses are the handsomest birds in many instances.

If there is one bird more than another that will put temptation in the way of youth, it is the pheasant. Why will he persist, evening after evening, when the trees are leafless, in roosting on the top branches of some slim tree, directly over a well-

frequented highroad, not singly, but in twos and threes dotted about? No one knows why, but they do this. And the strangest part of it is, they very rarely come to grief in such open places. I certainly have known of one such case, but that was excusable. A merry party were returning from a great rabbit-shooting on the borders of Sussex, and most of them were young fellows. As it was drawing near Christmas time, they were chatting about the pleasant duties to be performed at this festive time, —the sacred rites of mistletoe, for one, was discussed. When they were nearing home, and the horses were trotting sharply, one of them said, "Look at that bunch of mistletoe in front, just overhead! Pull up, driver, one of us will shoot that down; hold the horses tight in. You shoot, Harry," was said to one of the party; "you know very well you want it more than we do."

The young fellow got out of the trap, they handed him his gun, he aimed and fired, and down tumbled a fine cock pheasant.

"Pick him up!" "Jump in!" "You're a nice mistletoe poacher, you are," cried his friends. "Driver, let the horses go!"

As this took place within thirty yards of a keeper's cottage, the order to let the horses go was on their part a very wise one.

Pheasants that have not been reared artificially know how to take care of themselves perfectly. Some come to grief, but not to the extent the public is led to believe at times. Instead of being feathered idiots, as is implied, they are very wide-awake birds indeed. A few pheasants have been magnified into a sackful at times, and from that to a cart-load. For the sake of experiment, let one of those who inform the public so glibly how things are done, get a small sack, fill it full of hay, and walk along any country road at night. Then let him see how far he will go with it without being challenged. If people were all asleep with their hands in their pockets, and their ears stuffed with cotton-wool, wholesale poaching might be carried on.

Bad beer, and what is far worse, doctored spirits, lead loafing louts, whose highest feat has been the capture of a couple of tough rabbits, to speak foolishly about what they have done, and what they will yet do; but the man who really does do it keeps his mouth shut, and he would scorn to be

seen in the company of the former. Why pheasants should be considered to be so irresistible is a puzzle: in fact this is not really the case; if it were, as some would make out, the covers would be decimated.

A cock pheasant going full bat, with the bright sun of a winter's morning shining on his magnificent plumage, is a fine bit of bird-life as he shoots through the keen bright air—full-feathered and strong, his long tail spread out, the two central feathers swaying. He goes like a rocket,—no wonder the name of rocketer has been given him. Pheasants are grand birds, the ornaments of the wood and the fields that border them. When the goshawk was used in past times in order to supply the larder, this hawk must have been deadly to the pheasant, for the bird waits either on the fist, or perched on the bough of a tree. Even at the present time, as falconry is reviving, the pheasant feels the fatal grip of that fierce hawk.

The *partridge* is familiar to all who live in the country. Every child that toddles after its brothers and sisters of larger growth through the fields and meadows, knows well the call of the partridge, and the whirring flight of the bird.

If Scotland can claim the red grouse as her national game-bird, England may certainly lay claim to the grey partridge as her own, although the compact-looking active bird is to be found in suitable localities throughout the United Kingdom. Cultivation, which is as a rule so injurious to wild game-birds, has proved beneficial so far as the propagation of the partridge is concerned; for he, like the sparrow, thrives best close to the corn-fields, or we might say wherever agricultural pursuits are in full working order.

The bird's range is a varied one. He is in the fields as a general rule, no matter whether the crops of wheat, oats, barley, turnips, or marigolds are on or off. The greater part of the year is passed by the partridge in the fields. Some writers have mentioned moor-partridges in a way that might almost lead the general public to believe that we have two distinct species of the bird, or at least a well-marked variety of the common one; but this is not the case,—we have only one grey partridge.

When I write of fields as the bird's principal habitat both by day and night, our readers must

understand that the hedgerows and banks that enclose those, also the tufty borders of the grazing meadows, are to be included. Moor-partridges are wild bred birds which have been brought out on the moors, which are separated, in our southern counties, only by a splashed bank from the corn-fields. Having been hatched out on the moor, they, together with old birds, naturally frequent it; and they "jug" or squat closely together there at night. The fields are visited certainly, but the principal food-supply will be gleaned from their wild hatching-out place; and they fly farther and run longer distances, also they are a little smaller and darker, than those that keep to the corn and the root lands entirely. The food they get on the moors is in a great degree like that of the black-cock and red grouse, and their flesh is naturally darker than that of the other birds. The coveys found on the moors are wilder also, and far more gun-shy than are those of the lower grounds. When they are on wing you can very often watch them fly clean out of sight without dropping. These little differences are all we have been able to observe between the two; and in the Surrey

heath-lands we have a goodly number of these moor birds.

Scattered grains of corn, various seeds from the vegetation of the fields, far too numerous for us to mention, and those creeping and flying hosts that frequent the corn-lands—slugs, worms, beetles in their mature and their immature stages, flies and green food, with bits of green sharp gravel, swallowed to help digestion,—form the principal bill of fare of this bird. Those that live on the moors eat the green tender shoots of the heather, and in their season the whortleberries and those of the dewberry or trailing bramble.

The finest birds for size and plumage are found in some of the southern and eastern counties. Where the corn and marsh lands join each other, there is the perfect home for our birds. How often have I seen the coveys come whirring from the yellow corn on to the wide green flats which were quivering in the heat, in order to visit some of the countless ant-hills, where the great hares resting between the old mole-heaps started up as the birds dashed over them! Golden corn-fields, vast stretches of green flats bordered by the tide,

whilst a few sails dotted the water, made a very agreeable picture. The partridges found something there to please them certainly, for added to ants' eggs, there were grasshoppers in thousands. As you moved along you would be covered by these nimble skipjacks. Good food and shelter, with warmth,—for at that time our marsh summers were hot ones,—made all the difference to the size and plumage of the partridges which were found there in such great abundance. One of my friends who shot on his own marshes, with one of Manton's doubles, using either a Spanish pointer or a curly-coated setter—only seen now in old sporting works such as Daniels, and others of a like nature — used to leave a brace now and then when he passed our house. It was proper partridge-shooting then, not driving, and what was considered a fair day's sport then would be laughed at now. But the birds were cleanly killed by real sportsmen who knew how to shoot. Some of our readers will probably say mine are old-fashioned ideas. So they may be, but I am not able to alter them. When a brace was given to us in those days the feathers had a bloom on them like that on a bunch

of grapes. No sportsman at that time would allow the plumage of the birds that fell to his gun to be "mucked about" if he could possibly help it. Fishing and shooting are, I know, wide apart as sports, but the good old rule for feather will apply equally well to fin in this matter.

A good all-round angler, if he has had luck, will turn the fish out of his creel in perfect order, —a layer of fish and a layer of sedge or fern alternately. Out they come, a glittering heap, with their scaling perfect; and when treated in this manner they form really the most beautiful pictures of still life the eye can rest on.

The partridge, like that blessed bird of the Highlander, the red grouse, is considered to be a bird of good omen throughout the whole length and breadth of the country-side; for when his cheery call sounds from furrow and ridge the spring is coming, and summer will follow. Then also there is good to be got from the fresh scent of the ploughed fields, for there is truly life in the earth.

The plough has been left turned up on its side on the edge of this large field for two hours or more; warm showers have fallen at intervals through the

day and the sun has gone down, leaving a great broad line of saffron light edging the tops of the distant hills, with a great mass of warm grey rain-clouds above it. Plovers come flapping from the sheep-walks on the hills above to the freshly turned furrows below; it is too dusky to see them after they have settled, but their murmuring Weet-weets fall on the ear; and then comes the Chir-chir-chir-chir-chir up-up-chir-er-er, chir-chir-up, of the partridges with a rush. Others sail over-head as we lean over the old wooden gate that leads into the field; and a long jerking shadow flits past us, crossing the furrows,—it is a solitary hare that is hastening to join a regular hare frolic on the slopes of the upland pastures.

No game-bird that I am acquainted with is more able to take care of itself than the partridge is. I have known the birds lose their wits at times under exceptional circumstances, but not very often, for the partridge is the picture of dashing alertness.

It has always been a joy to me to see a large covey melt away, so to speak, out of sight in a fallow field where they have been confidently feed-

ing, when we have very cautiously let them know that we were looking directly at them. The old cock, that at times would stand nearly on end, just to look all round him, I have seen lowering himself, as if some spring within him was gently getting limper and limper. Through my field-glass I have noted the outside birds raise their clean-cut heads for a second or two, then lower them, depress their tails to the ground, and glide towards the others; a few brown dots showing, now here, now there, and the large covey is soon invisible if on a fallow field—not stubble, but old fallow lea. All our game-birds possess this moon-seed property of making themselves practically invisible when there is any necessity for their doing so.

Before these violent changes occurred in our favourite Surrey moorland haunts, I used often to amuse myself by watching black-game being properly set up in a glass case. A black-cock in full breeding plumage is one of the most imposing and conspicuous birds you can look at, though the bird is out of his proper place when he is with the bird-preserver. The place to observe him is when he goes to feed on a dark patch of moor-bog,

with white and grey bleached stones cropping out of it: you will not see him before he dashes up in front of you, but this has often taken place when my eyes and ears have been opened to their widest.

These few notes taken from the life, made as I have wandered sketch-book and note-book in hand, with the birds before me, in the summer and also in the bitter winter weather, have nothing to do with keepers or poachers. The so-called exposure of poaching manœuvres is utter nonsense. Rest assured that when keepers grind their teeth in impotent rage at certain jobs, they do not know much about how the thing is done, or they would certainly put a stop to it to save their places; and poachers who are up to their business hold their tongues about it. When I read of whole coveys being netted, field after field, I feel simply disgusted at the statements, for if ever a bird slept with one eye open it is the partridge. As to the green plover that frequents the same open fields, he walks in his sleep, and moans out his Pewit-weet-weet-weet!

One thing I am positive of, twenty pheasants

come to grief for every single partridge. I should just like to see the fields—at least in the southern counties—swept over with gossamer-silk nets in the way some gentlemen, who know so precisely how the thing was done, try to explain so lucidly.

Partridges pair, and they are devoted parents, not only when the chicks are out, but also when their broods are fully fledged. The wiles and shifts both parents will use to lure you away from their young, whom you so frequently startle from off some of the numerous ant-hills that crop up from the turf and ferns, must be seen to be credited; it would be useless to attempt the description of it. Broken wings, broken legs, fits, and death-throes, —all are gone through, close to your feet, in less time than it has taken us to mention these assumed afflictions, giving the young plenty of time to get to cover in all directions, and into all sorts of places. Then, again, if you keep very quiet, you will presently hear the old birds call, and in less than a minute the little family will be busy round some ant-heap, as if nothing had disturbed them at all.

No one ever dreams of hurting the innocent crea-

tures; there is the traditional folk-lore, and there are woodland laws, fully recognised by all classes. These have not the least bearing on the game-laws, but they are equally strict, and must be acted upon. Even if some did feel disposed to break them, they could not do it unless they were willing to be "cut" by all wood dwellers.

Two very different kinds of ant-hills supply the eggs or ant-pupæ to the young of game-birds, and of partridges in particular. First, there are the common emmet-heaps, or ant-hills, which are scattered all over the land; go where you will, you will find them. These the birds scratch and break up, picking out the eggs as they fall from the light soil of the heaps; the partridges work them easily. But the ant-eggs proper — I am writing now from the game-preserving point of view—come from the nests or heaps of the great wood-ants, either the black or the red ants. These are mounds of fir-needles, being in many instances as large at the bottom in circumference as a waggon-wheel, and from two to three feet in height—even larger where they are very old ones. They are found in fir-woods, on the warm sunny

slopes, under the trees as a rule, pretty close to the stems of the trees. The partridges and their chicks do not visit these heaps, for they would get bitten to death by the ferocious creatures. The keepers and their lads procure the eggs of these, and a nice job it is; a wood-pick, a sack, and a shovel are the implements required for the work. Round the men's gaiters or trousers leather straps are tightly buckled, to prevent if possible the great ants from fixing on them, as they will try to do like bull-dogs, when the heaps are harried. The top of the heap is shovelled off, laying open the domestic arrangements of the ant-heap, and showing also the alarmed and furious ants trying to carry off their large eggs to a place of safety; but it is all in vain—eggs and all, they go into the sack. In spite of every precaution, the ant-egg getters do get bitten severely, for the ants would fix anything. They spit, as the men term it, their strong acid venomously. When a lot of heaps have been harried, it smells as if some coarse kind of aromatic vinegar had been poured out under the trees.

The ants revenge themselves in this fashion: they fix you with their pincers, then bending their bodies

between their legs, they eject the acid into the wound their strong pincers have made. Thousands of the creatures can be seen, raised up on their legs, their bodies bent underneath and forwards, spraying formic acid in all directions. If you place your hand over the great hollow in the heap, it will get finely covered with it. I have been bitten by wood-ants, and have had to bear it, but it was a sore experience. No notice is taken of what a keeper or his lad may say when under punishment from ant-bites; they had need be forgiven if they use improper words to the grindstone, after they have come home from ant-egg getting.

These heaps are harried for the home-bred birds—that is, home and hand fed ones, both pheasants and partridges, hatched out by small game-hens—game-fowl kept specially for that purpose—from the eggs that have been taken from the outlying nests. Other strains of the domestic fowl are used, but the game-hens are the favourite foster-parents. When the birds are fed with the eggs, as many of the ants as it is possible to get rid of are kept out, but some are sure to be mixed up with the

eggs, and these fix on the feeding birds, making them jump off the ground. The common emmets—the creatures that the wild birds feed on, their young broods particularly—are harmless, but the large wood-ants are not. I have known them pull creatures to pieces and eat them up so cleanly, that their skeletons have been far better prepared than you would see them among specimens got up for anatomical purposes; in fact some, who know what the ants can and will do, place small animals and birds, ranging from rabbits, squirrels, and mice, to birds from the size of a partridge down to the golden-crested wren, in their nests. If a perfect skeleton is required of a viper, snake, slow-worm, toad, frog, or either of the lizards, place the reptile in one of these fir-needle heaps in some lonely place in the fir-woods, one that is not likely to be visited, and you will get what you want.

In a dead hard winter, in fact such a one as we frequently experienced, our friend the partridge is not put to it as his larger associates are, for the bird naturally is a ground one; all his living is got from it: he lives, broods, and jugs there. No matter how deep the snow may be, or how intense

the frost, it does not cover up all places completely. Brambles, thorns, and dead bracken, torey-grass and bent tuffets, may to all appearance look covered up, but it is not really so; underneath all is warm and dry, and not a vestige of snow will you find there, unless you kick it in with your foot, or hit it with your stick to make it fall. Nature's own pure covering this is wherewith to protect her children. They know where to go, and how to form their shelters from all the winds that blow. As to feeding, not one-tenth part of the wild fruits and berries are gathered by human hands; and as to the plants that bear seed of some kind, who can tell how many provide food for the game-birds? for they ripen and fall, being unconsidered hedge-row and field-plant provender. I have just returned from rough-meadow lands, snow-covered, whither I went in order to watch outlying coveys feeding in the snow.

Hawkweeds, thistles, ground brambles—the trailing kind that runs over the pastures in places here and there, forming low clumps a few inches in height—are not exactly what a farmer would like to see in his pasture-lands; but as some of these at one time

were part of the common lands, cultivation has not quite got rid of the vegetation indigenous to common land. No matter what the farmer may think, the birds know this is their own feeding-range. For the hedge-dykes that surround these rough pastures have a growth of their own, of kixes, wild parsnips, mothmullein, long grass, and brambles, all which are very long in decaying. They dry up hard and droop down; their stems may be broken by the winds, but there they are, snow-covered certainly, but warmly covering in the dry ditches below them, thus forming fine warm shelters for the partridges. Birds do not feel cold as common humanity does; for quite putting on one side the feather quilts with which they are covered, their blood is much hotter than our own—that of game-birds particularly so.

There they are, about the middle of the field, heads down, backs up, and their tails drooped, busily feeding round the dead stems of some weeds and low brambles. Ten or a dozen of them there are, I fancy; for you can always count for more than you can see at all times, and we can plainly see the bunched-up backs of nine.

They are picking and scratching round and

amongst the trailing brambles: none of the brambles lose all their leaves in the winter; green and withered leaves can be seen on them, no matter how hard the weather may be. As the small fruit with large seeds is not considered worth picking, it drops when dead ripe and falls on the ground; the pulp rots but the seeds remain there, well protected by the tangle above them, and the birds know of it. When hard times come they know where food can be found, and they get it as a rule. There are no rules, however, without exceptions.

Partridges jug or roost in a sort of round-robin fashion, their heads turned outwards and their tails of course the reverse way. This is all right, and very nice when weather permits it; but just before the sun, like a globe of fire seen through the cold grey clouds, gets very low down, the partridges make for warmer quarters. I have remarked in some of my books on natural life, furred and feathered, how very closely wild creatures at times will come to the localities where man has his home and surroundings. The subject of this chapter is a keen bird, and from time beyond record his race have kept near the tillers of the soil.

If I wished to find a covey at night in such weather as I have just come in from, my moustache and beard stiff with ice, I should know where to look for them, and I should find them, snug and warm as toast, where no breath of wind or biting frost could reach them; but just where that particular place is I must certainly decline to tell, and for very excellent reasons. I do not kill birds, nor have I the least wish to do so. One thing, however, I will say about it, and that is, the partridges would be where most would probably never dream of searching for them.

The bird's natural enemies are comparatively few, taking into consideration his ground habitat. Raptores in southern countries—the sparrow-hawk excepted—are very few; and this hawk rarely kills the partridge, for the reason that hedgerow birds are so abundant, and they are a far easier quarry than our swift bird. I could, if I thought it necessary, give authentic information of the large bags of partridges made in past years, but as this chapter deals more with the natural history of the brave bird than with the sport he provides for the sportsman, such records need not be given.

Although the larger raptores in southern countries are conspicuous by their absence, when migrating time comes round some of these long and wide-winged beauties pass over the southern countries in small numbers,—a couple of pairs or a single pair, as the case may be. Sometimes a few buzzards—a very few, either the rough-legged, common, or honey buzzard, which all come to grief—are brought singly to me to look at, and there it ends.

The only chance we have now of looking at one or two of the larger sort is when the corn is cut, and the partridges feed and shelter more in the root-crops, turnips or swedes by preference. Mangolds, or "wuzzles," they work as well, but the turnips are favoured by them most. Harriers at one time—the hen-harriers—were frequently to be seen on the wide heaths, commons, and moors which were so very numerous in this district—Surrey. These, when changes came about, were killed of course—at least folks killed as many as they could.

After forming their hunting-grounds for so many years, it is not to be wondered at if a pair still pay a passing visit when on flight, for the line of country

is still the same: that at any rate has not altered in its formation, although new-comers have scratched about a bit.

"What are you looking at, my man, so deeply?" I ask of a lad who was sheep tending.

"Why, them 'ere big birds, hawks o' some sort; I think they be arter the partridges."

"Where?"

"Oh, you'll see 'em, no fear,—they are gone up the walley now, they'll come back agin; they've bin goin' backwards an' forrards fur some time now. Don't ye hear the birds holler? they're frittened at 'em, I ken tell ye. There they be!—ain't they big uns?"

A pair of hen-harriers these were, partridge hawking, the grey cock and the larger ring-tailed hen,—a fine sight. They had not struck a quarry yet, for partridges do not let hawks get them if they can help it. The pair evidently thought they had been wasting time for no purpose, for they dashed past, over to a large field of swedes; and here something must have told them they would meet with better success, for they set to work like a couple of pointers.

We could see nothing of the partridges for the leaves. Once the ring-tail made a pounce, and we could hear the covey shriek in terror, but no capture was made. Presently the harriers changed their tactics, and they hunted the lines of swedes backwards and forwards for a time, nearly over the whole length; then they shot back and worked across it, beginning at the far end and working towards us. Not a foot of that field did that pair appear to miss, for the two of us were standing on a bit of a nob of ground overlooking the field.

"They're workin' on 'em up close now, jist the same as my old dog corners my sheep; them 'ere partridges wun't be able to put up with much more on it."

Nor did they; for at the last flight up, the whole covey dashed out screaming from the corner of the field: like lightning the hawks pounced — clap— clap! A cloud of feathers flew as each struck their bird, and that pair of harriers breakfasted on partridges.

It was the fashion in the days of my youth for the farmers to have sparrow clubs. These murdering

institutions were in great force, and they entailed on every farm a sparrow-shooter, a good-sized lad as a rule, who knew a lot when his father was not near him. Now no matter where you might see that lad, you would be sure to see one of the farm sheep-dogs. It was not on duty with him, but both boy and dog understood each other well. One of these sparrow-shooters, about my own age, on a farm where I visited, was a lad that had gone to the same school as myself, so that we became confidential at once. "I say, there's a lot o' partridges in the swedes," said the boy.

"I know there is; but we don't dare meddle with them—they are game-birds. Besides, we couldn't hit them flying if we tried."

"Well, we don't want to hit 'em flyin', do we? Do you think as every bird as is shot is killed flyin'? I knows they ain't. You look here—old Mike the keeper was always braggin' about his shootin', an' about bein' able to git birds quick when they was wanted. Well, he was carryin' on one day down at the 'Prince George,' and master was in the best room, an' he heard him hollerin' about. Next mornin', when he come for orders, the master told him

he must have half-a-dozen brace to send off by coach in two hours' time. 'It won't be any trouble,' he said, 'for you can shoot.' You should 'a seen old Mike tear off. He comes to me and asks if I'd seen 'em in the forty-acre stubbles, an' I told him yes. Well, if he didn't crawl along the hedge, an' let fly into a covey feedin'; he slaughtered four on 'em—he let drive both barrels. I slipped along after him, an' see him do it. After that he looks over another field, an' there was a lot runnin' up a furrer. He raked 'em, killed the lot—leastways one on 'em fluttered over the hedge; I got that. Over he comes, an' he started a bit; then he begins to talk big, an' taxes me with havin' that bird. I says yes, I knows I have, for I see you shoot one lot feedin', an' the other runnin' up the furrer. You can shoot, Mike. Then he said he didn't want the bird, it was only his fun, I could keep it. No, they don't shoot all on 'em flyin'. Look here, I'm sparrer-shootin', I ain't s'posed to shoot them on the wing. If them partridges feeds close up in the swedes, they ain't far off. I've bin watchin' them leaves wiggle about; I shall take 'em for sparrers an' shoot. You stop an' see me have a pull. Nobody wun't know on it, fur

ye see I'm sparrer-shootin'. They're a comin' nearer; look at them leaves a movin'. Jack can hear 'em, look at his ears cockin' up. Git down as low as ye can behind the hedgerow. Don't ye hear 'em rustlin'? I shan't let em get much nearer, for fear o' blowin' 'em to rags and tatters. Look out, now, I'm a-goin' to let drive." Bang went the old single Manton. "I've got 'em!" cried the boy.

There was no mistake about it, for a duck's tail showed for a moment, then two feet worked in the leaves and dropped. Before a word could be uttered, duck number two sprang from the leaves and tumbled over dead. "Come on, Jack," said my companion; "if we stops here, all the lot on us will git transported."

Charles II. is generally credited with first trying to introduce the French partridge, or Guernsey red-leg, into this country. Why this handsome game-bird should have the adjective French tacked before its name, I do not know, for the bird has a very considerable Continental range. It is supposed to have been fairly introduced into some places on the Continent, which, however, claim it as indigenous to the

soil. As to this, I am not able to say anything. The red-legged partridge is now well established in some of the eastern and southern counties. It has, I know, the character of driving away our native bird the grey partridge; but this is not correct, the habits of the two birds are different. I have never seen the two birds in the same locality, and I have never known a case of inter-breeding. But my experience may be of a limited nature, and I assert nothing.

The bird appears to me to be somewhat akin to the francolins. Here, in suitable localities, it breeds if let alone; but I fear more birds are quietly got rid of for their supposed ill-feeling towards our native bird than any one hears about. I know something of the process. There is the beautiful creature on her eggs under a torey tuffet laced with sprigs of young thorn. A figure draws near with stealthy footstep and raised stick. Down comes the stick, the bird is killed, and the eggs trampled under foot, as if the bird was a hen-harrier. "Them 'ere damned Frenchies kills t'others," is the explanation surlily given, if you ask for one;—a poor one certainly, for they have never once been caught by them doing

that. This bird has more than once within my experience dashed down in flocks or huge coveys, quite exhausted, on some parts of our foreshores. Whether it was that a fog had sprung up and drifted inshore from off the water, puzzling the birds on their inland flights—for all birds move at times—so that they had flown out to sea in the fog from the French side of the water, at last making English soil, no one knew. There the partridges were, and for a time completely done for, so far as flying went. Great numbers were easily captured by those who had the luck to be strolling about where they settled down, close to the water's edge.

It is impossible, even now, to chronicle all the remarkable movements of birds at different times, for hundreds have not, one is sorry to say, the least interest in such matters, beyond that of eating the birds that fall in their way. Where birds not commonly seen can be disposed of, it is a different matter—then the pocket is benefited.

The nimble little fellow, the *quail*, that visits us in the spring and leaves us as a rule in the fall, might be called a dwarf partridge. Some winter with us, a few only at one time. I knew where he could be

found in some fields that were at the foot of one of the Surrey hills, close to a railway station, where the little fellow's call of "Bit by bit," or as others had it, "Wet, my weet—wet, my weet," was frequently heard. I knew they were quails, for I had a fine cock from there; his call had been the cause of his death. One bird out of several might be spared, I thought, for natural history purposes, so I had him.

At that time I painted my birds in the surroundings in which I found them. When I got a bird, a considerable armful of tangle went home with him from the spot where I found it. If I were to gather together all my earlier work, given as soon as it was done to my young companions who roamed the fields with me, I often think I should be astonished at the quantity of it. Full of artistic faults no doubt the drawings would be; indeed they received plenty of criticism from our elders. I never asked them to look at my humble efforts, but they gave it all the same. Bitterness of heart it caused me as a boy of thirteen. I felt I had done no wrong, and yet I was made to feel in some way small and foolish. "This was too much worked up," "that was too

hard," and "the other was too highly coloured;" "it was a great pity I did not give my mind to other things and let birds alone." There was no call for this. I was at that time physically delicate, and a sensitive youngster; however, I had my way, being determined to have it.

But I am forgetting myself,—the quail has led me to do this; for as I write I am once more in that rough field, thick with thistles, burdocks, dock, sorrel, ox-eye daisies, kixes, hawkweed, and many other plants, the whole under-surface being covered with tussocks and bent tufts.

Here it was that I listened to the simple call of the quail, and here I got my bird. That field is now fine pasture-land. I hear the corncrake and the partridge, but "Wet, my weet—wet, my weet," we never expect to hear again,—the quails' feeding-grounds having been improved away. The quails imported into this country in the quail season are larger and better marked, I think, than those found wild here. Quite recently I compared some sky-larks from the Continent with some of our English field-larks, and noticed the same difference. This may be caused by a warmer climate, and possibly

a more varied food-supply. It is certain that such a difference does exist. As the quail is a bird of passage, and one of the most noted in ornithological records of the earliest dates, he no doubt attains his fullest development in those countries that are best conducive to his wellbeing. Sometimes there is a notice made of quails being shot when every one has supposed them to have been far over seas; this is nothing to wonder at,—other birds beside these will also stay behind at times.

A dainty little fellow is the quail, and perfectly contented to pipe his simple call in surroundings such as those amongst which I have found him many years ago.

In conclusion, I wish to remark that as the years pass on I think a revision will be effected in the so-called classification of wild creatures, although some at the present day consider dry-bone-dust theories to be as unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. But having for some years pondered over this matter, I think that such must ultimately be the case.

If such a change comes, I think that the great bustard will be placed at the head of the plovers;

the general habits of the bird are plover-like. Nature has no violent breaks in her perfect system. The great bustard, the little bustard, and the stone-curlew lead down to the plovers; if you look at them closely they seem to be near akin. When I see a bustard, in my own mind I always class him as a giant plover.

This may not be a new thought; many others may have had the same ideas as I have on this question. Only sometimes, when I am looking at the few stray feathers that I own, the desire will come that some day—a not far distant one I hope, if I am to see it—some things may be made yet a little clearer than they are at present.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHANCE SHOTS AND ODD FISH.

THE gun and the rod were formerly used by the working classes far more than they are at the present time. And indeed the gun was necessary for the protection of the crops in different stages of their growth, just after planting as well as when they arrived at maturity; especially in isolated districts, where for miles nothing met the eye on each side of the long sun-scorched roads in the summer time except fruit-orchards, and gardens used for growing vegetables and fruit. It was only natural that the owners should seek to protect their harvests from the feathered thieves.

Hedgerow fruit is all very well for birds when the season of cultivated fruits is over, but not

before that. Many of the insect-feeders, with their young, just before leaving us for their winter quarters, play havoc, if permitted, with the smaller fruits. Strange to say, inland districts, well wooded, do not suffer nearly so much as those close to the tide or the tidal rivers; for just at the time when bush-fruits are ripe, most of the birds are beginning to think about going back to where they started from, over the water; and day by day they feed and flit nearer to the coast-lines, a few families at a time, until the fruit-gardens and orchards are alive with small birds of one sort and another, and all of them feeding on the fruit. This had to be seen to; so, as nearly every house had a gun in it of some kind or other, those who worked in the orchards and gardens had not much difficulty in finding one for those of their sons who had been promoted to the proud position of bird-shooting. These were not fowling-pieces, only the ordinary light guns, — "snipe guns" they were called, in order to distinguish them from the others. The larger farmhouses generally had a complete battery hanging by leather loops over the broad mantel. But now and then you would see one or two of

the lads with guns that had come from their own homes.

These bird-shooters were not taken at random for the job; some small amount of diplomacy would be used beforehand about the matter. First the master or one of his sons would inquire in a very quiet fashion if any of the young ones had a hankering after a gun, which inquiry generally brought out the information that two or three on 'em had got some most "owdacious larruppings" for meddling with their parent's guns. As these "larruppings" were of a severe character, the very fact of a boy's running the risk of one to gratify his ruling passion proved beyond doubt their mother's assertions that the young rips had "got it in 'em." One by one, under some plausible pretext or other, the rips would be asked to attend one of their masters with his gun, a light single one, round the farm. After a shot or two, the lad would be asked if *he* would like to have a shot at a bird.

"I should, jest about, Master Ned. Jest you let me hev a go at a sparrer."

"A sparrow, you young varmint! why, you couldn't shoot into a barn if the doors were kept open for ye."

"Oh! couldn't I?"

"Well now, look here, I'm goin' to load her light for ye; there she is, full-cocked. Do ye seen them yaller-hammers?"

"Not now, I don't."

"How's that?"

"Why, ain't they flew frum the hedge into the weeds in the field?"

"Now look here—if you gives me any more o' that, you young imp, I'll trim an ash sucker for ye, jest for ye to see how ye like that. Here ye are, walk 'em up, give 'em fair rise; and, don't kill 'em *all*."

The rip snaked up, the birds rose, and down dropped a fine cock yellow-hammer.

"You're a nice un: now come here and tell me what you had that larrupping for, three weeks back."

"Well, you knows Josher's p'inter?"

"What p'inter?"

"Why, Josher's weathercock p'inter,—what my father drawed an' cut out o' copper, an' painted natural as life. Larry's father's orchard is at the back o' his place; there was him, an' 'Loader,' an' 'Finny,' an' 'Genus,' an' me. Larry got the gun, an'

Finny got me to shoot at Josher's p'inter, when he p'inted east'ard. I knocked his head a one side on him. An' Josher was lookin' out o' his back winder, an' see me shoot; an' that's how I cum to hev a larrupping."

"How about the p'inter, eh?"

"Father set him to rights agin."

Some who were not so proficient as the rip above sketched were only allowed to shoot blank charges for a time. Never at any time were heavy charges used, for fear of cutting the shoots about. The birds, as they dipped from one lot of fruit to another, require quick shooting between the rows. This sort of thing in course of time made good shots of the boys. Many of the best shots I ever knew—rough-shooters, no doubt, they would be called now—had their early training in the fruit-orchards and gardens. The birds knew perfectly well what they had to expect, and they acted accordingly; the craft shown at times by them was something to wonder at. I have known wild pigeons come great distances to feed on the peas alone. In after-years, when some of the boys had moved far away from their early home, the gun was handled by them still

to good purpose. Even now the sight of a fine fowling-piece will make the eyes of some of my old chums, who have had to lay up the gun for good, glisten again, and will send their thoughts back far away to the time when they were young.

Although I have pleaded for the birds, there are times when under stress of weather they commit serious depredations on field crops, more particularly on fields devoted to market produce. Thousands of skylarks, hundreds of wood-larks and titlings, will all take heavy tithes of it. It is, to say the least of it, a curious sight to see these birds, with missel-thrushes, blackbirds, redwings, common thrushes, and snipes, all rise from a patch of savoy cabbages. Where the birds peck and make holes, the wet gets in and rots them. The snipes are there for a different purpose—that is, to probe about the soft places where the water drops from the leaves when it thaws a little.

The swallows are twittering to their young broods, which are well on the wing, and are just now resting on the top of the large chimney of the old thatched farmhouse for a little while, before they make the circuit of the farmyard and outbuildings again, for

they are not firmly feathered yet. So still is it that their cheerful song sounds quite loudly. The poultry are all quiet; even the ducks are standing on one leg by the side of their pond, fast asleep, with their heads half buried in their back feathers. The hum of bees comes from the garden,— a dreamy hum that would lull you off to sleep if you listened to it long. Some sparrows fly up on the thatch, and give out their chisick, chisick, chisick! then all is still for a time.

Suddenly one of the hens that has a brood of chicks screams out her alarm-note. Something is wrong, for she is in a state of the greatest excitement, with her chicks all under her.

Very quietly the master takes his gun down from over the fireplace, where it is kept: the row has roused him from his after-dinner forty winks. He looks out from the door, but nothing is to be seen. Just as he is going in again, a grey-brown bird shoots over, above the spot where the hen has got her chicks. As this bird rises, he fires: for the moment he thinks he has missed it, and the hawk is nearly over the barn when something evidently goes wrong with it, for it hangs in the air for a moment, drops one

wing, and beats with the other at a most rapid rate; turns over, rights again, spreads its tail out, and then comes down dead. In those days the gun was always ready to hand for a chance shot.

"What is it, Mark? What do you want of me?" asks the farmer, as a labourer comes up to him, evidently with some request.

"Why, I've cum to ask ye if ye have a rabbit that ye ken give me fur my young un; he's bin down now fur a long time, an' he's just gettin' about agin."

"Have we got one, mother?"

"No, father. I wish we had for the poor child's sake."

"Can you shoot, Mark?"

"I could one time, master, an' I thinks as I could now."

"Well, look here, take my double—she is loaded—and see if you can get a young one or a couple out of that young clover-field. I must be going out, or I'd try and get you one."

Not long afterwards a couple of shots rang out, and the man returned with a couple of rabbits, also with the news that he had discovered a heap of guinea-fowls' eggs where those shy birds had nested

away in company, without having been found. If the mistress could find him a trug he would bring them in,—there was such a lot of them!

This illustrates the feeling that used to exist between the employer and the employed; the people about the farms helped to protect what was on them. If, in a case such as I have mentioned, something a little out of the usual routine was required, it was freely asked for, and as freely granted. For in those days of sturdy independence and self-respect, a master knew that if a man asked a favour from him he needed it.

Rough-shooting, so called to distinguish it from cover-shooting, has a charm above any others for those who have been used to it. Where game was not strictly preserved, rough-shooting was the order of the day in our North Kent districts; for every man shot on his own grounds or on those he rented, and at times he freely invited his friends to come with him: one condition only had to be remembered, no hares were to be shot; they were left for coursing.

The partridges, owing to the great extent of their feeding-grounds, were very strong on the wing, and, as a rule, wild as hawks at certain seasons. What

might get up when the dogs pointed was a matter for speculation—it might be a short-eared owl, a stone curlew or the great curlew, or a covey of partridges. Nothing was done in a hurry: if it was only a snipe, and he was missed, the reason for this would be calmly talked over, and the bird would be sought for and put up again if possible. Even the dogs, the rough-coated setters and the Spanish pointers, went to work deliberately. When the dykes were crossed they looked up them and down them, to see what was moving—Jack-hern, coot, flappers, rail, or moor-hen; nothing was thought beneath their notice if they were fowl. But although our men were good shots as a rule, exceptions did exist—the bags at times were light ones; for it was a difficult matter, under certain weather influences, to get within range of birds on exposed places, their hearing is so very quick. Then again they will squat like stones; and the reason for these very opposite tactics on their part has not yet been explained. In any case, whatever the luck might be, the birds that were shot were nicely put away in the men's large shooting-jacket pockets, so that they should look well when turned

out for inspection. Perhaps there is not time for this sort of thing now; the fowl that have reached me lately have been sadly tumbled.

Wood-pigeons are very wary, quick-sighted, strong-winged birds. All know this that have watched them, or brought them down with the gun. At times they appear to get bewildered: I have had an example of this recently on one of our hills close to Dorking. As a rule I am out in all weathers—snow, frost, rain, or fog. A very heavy fog had settled on the top of the hill when I was about the middle of it; so heavy it was that the water dropped from the bare twigs of the trees like rain. From a lot of beeches on the left of me, as I walked, two shots were fired, one after the other, as fast as the triggers could be pulled. Then over my head, like a gale of wind, a flock of wood-pigeons passed: a thousand of them there were, if there was one.

As the shots were very close, I slipped down into a mossy hollow, where one of the old bridle-paths ran: the fog being thick, the shots were quite close enough to be unpleasant. Having known some sad accidents take place in foggy weather,

I did my best to avoid one. Hardly had I got out of harm's way, when the pigeons passed over me on their way back to the part where they had left some of their number behind. Again two shots rang out above me, and the pigeons rushed over as before to the firs. What could be the meaning of it, I wondered?

In less than five minutes back they were again: this time a single shot was fired, followed up in about ten minutes by another. As I had my field-glass and they were low down, I could see all I wanted whilst they passed and repassed overhead, for the fog broke now and then, as the wind moved it.

Why the birds should have received that number of shots, and still have returned for more, is out of my reckoning. The next day was clear and bright, but cold: where the pigeons had gone to then, I do not know; I did not see them, nor did I hear any shooting. Birds are in one place one day, and gone the next. As one pigeon-shooter told me, "If you don't ketch 'em on the flop, you loses 'em; most special them 'ere furrin pigeons what cums and goes."

Those who wander for chance shots pass through very lonely places at times; and those shooters with whom I associated were men who were, as a rule, much influenced by the mysteries of nature. Many a time have I rested to talk over the wild records of past times with them, when out on the search for fowl. My companions, like myself, were brim-full of the traditions of the flats. There was one spot that was under a ban, owing to local traditions, which had a fascination for me from my earliest childhood.

Where the tide works its own way, if you wish to get to a special place I know of, you must go in certain directions to it. It is not the least use going by a boat, although you could pull to it direct; for the moment you got on shore you would be trespassing. This was fiercely resented by all classes, rich or poor, so no one trespassed as a rule, thus saving a lot of trouble on both sides. Now to reach one place where fowl were abundant, we had to go six miles from our own hamlet before we could get to a narrow track that led to one of the smallest and most secluded fishing hamlets that I should imagine ever existed. If ever a place could

be called out of the world, that might have been. A long narrow lane, with high hedges on each side, led you to the grey-flint-towered church: through the churchyard you passed on to a wood which adjoined it so closely, that the branches of some of the outside trees almost touched the churchyard wall. Through the wood a path led down to the few scattered houses; then came the flats and the tide.

It was a quiet God's-acre, that daisy-dotted resting-place, for no one visited it except on Sundays. Nothing was to be heard but the jackdaws in the old tower, and the chatter and whistle of the starlings that built there. The magpies that were very numerous in the district would sit on the wall or gate of the church, and chatter when they heard footsteps; or walk, with their beautiful tails thrown up, through some of the long grass and tangle that grew there. Great brambles grew by the side of the wall, covered in the season with the finest blackberries that could be found anywhere; but they were never touched except by the birds, for all the traditions connected with that last resting-place were sad ones. The fringe of the wood

spread in the shape of scattered bushes, most of them large thorns, for some distance out on the flats. As the drainage from the upland fields fell into the dykes of the flats just here, certain fowl, such as ducks, teal, and snipe, haunted it. Best of all, it was free for us at any rate to shoot there, and to take a friend with us if we chose to do so; but I generally went then, as I do now, alone. Not that I ever brought one bird from there, for the gun was only the pretext for my visit; the wild beauty of the place as the sun went down, the cries of fowl and their manœuvres before they flighted for the night, had more charms for me than shooting had. The place had a bad name, for it was a dangerous place to be out on at night, when the tide covered the flats almost within a stone's-throw of the hamlet, if it could be called one; so I always left them before dusk fell.

Turning my face homewards, full of thoughts about things such as I have at last after all these years been able to put before my kind readers, I have seen great masses of clouds, purple and gold, sinking down behind that grey church. The wood that hid the greater part of it was a mass of deep

grey shadow, the top part of the trees catching a flush of rosy light as the sun got low. More unfortunate accidents have taken place there, in past times, than in any other place in this district, which is lonely even now. The few that now shoot there give the place a bad report. This has nothing to do with the people—for, if their blood runs hot, they are kindly folks. It is owing to the treacherous nature of the waters and the flats that border on them.

One Christmas eve, as the bells were ringing their glad tidings out over the waters so near to the old church, two fowlers were coming in from the tide. How the catastrophe happened no one knew, but the boat drifted in bottom upwards, and two days afterwards the fowlers were found stretched on the ooze.

There is no such thing as extermination to be feared so far as wild-fowl are concerned, although the reclamation of valuable land for grazing and building purposes from the sea has necessarily done away with the decoys that captured them in such vast numbers, as our decoy records prove. There are only more left to go elsewhere. Because

creatures that visit us are no longer to be circumvented as they used to be, it is not that they do not come here as before; for they do, but not to stay where they once did in fancied security.

It was this very feeling of security that was the cause of their destruction in hosts for the market. Where their food is, there they still come; only they are all on the alert now. If they have traditions of their own, they have been handed down of late years in minute detail for the benefit of all fowl that may visit the grass-covered ooze flats, and the sands where at one time they could come and nest, and also feed without molestation. They are not able to do this any longer. Yet listen on flats that I know now, at night, and then say if the fowl are altogether gone.

. . . . . .

"Have you had any sport, Billy?" I ask a dried-up-looking individual who is dressed in stained cord trousers, nearly covered with what was once a white apron. Over these he wears a flannel jacket, set off by a rusty battered drain-pipe hat of the old orthodox pattern.

"No, it ain't a bit o' use; ye see this 'ere weather

is sickenin' hot for fish, they wun't bite at nothin'. 'Tis no use, I knows, comin' out; but I can't keep indoors, — it does me good only to looter along the banks an' look at the water; 'tis pleasant-like to look at things, if the fish wun't bite. I bin saunterin' up the stream that runs from the moor; I knows there is good trout there, but the holes they lay in is covered over with great bramble-bushes; they lop right over to t'other bank o' the stream; there ain't no chance at all for nothin'. This 'ere spell o' hot weather has smothered the water with flies an' caterpillars; what the fish wants, they sucks in without hardly movin' for it, an' then they lays up. If this keeps on 'twill ruin fishin'."

Of all the anglers I have ever known, and I have seen many in my time, Billy, for originality, I think eclipsed them all.

The loss of his precious old hat would have ruined him, battered and rusty as it was, for it contained all his choice fishing-gear. The inside of it was fitted up in the most ingenious manner: hooks and lines, silk, wax, and wax ends, all could be found by him in that venerable head-covering. If any one had been wicked enough to bonnet Billy,

he would have had a considerable tangle to get out of his mop of iron-grey hair; but the most reckless respected that fishing-tackle repository, and the old man too. He only owned one rod which had been made by himself—a pike rod with tin ferrules, that had been broken in the middle in a tussle with a pike which Billy nearly landed, that had got a head on him, the old fellow said, like a donkey. He had spliced it with waxed ends. This he only used when pike-fishing; for other purposes he cut one from the river-side. Billy was generally credited with knowing all the haunts of the fish in the river: one thing he certainly could always tell, and that was where to go for them when they fed.

The spell of hot weather has brought thunder up; a few showers have fallen, followed by a steady downpour. Billy rubs his hands, and informs all his fishing acquaintances that "this 'ere rain will do a power o' good." The river rises higher and higher; the bridges over the mill-stream are impassable, for the water is up on a level with their top rails. The millers shout out from the garden of the mill-house that they reckon there is a fine lot of eels in the eel-trap, if they could

get at them; but this they are not able to do, for the water is waist-high on the bottom floor of the mill. A rushing, swirling, clay-coloured torrent is now that usually sluggish river called the Mole. Rabbits, rats, moor-hens, dabchicks, rails, and otters are all out in the fields — the rabbits and birds showing openly, the otters and rats under cover close to the water. It is still raining heavily, and I am out for purposes of observation.

I like to watch the various ways in which wild creatures shift for themselves when driven to extremities. The rabbits, moor-hens, rails, and rats will find plenty to eat on the edge of the fields; and the otters will kill and eat any of these, if they get hungry. The greater part of these flooded-out creatures feed openly, but they keep close to cover of some sort into which they can dash if alarmed. Nothing could live in the river at the rate the rain is coming down now. The brooks that lead into the river are bank-high, kept back by the water rushing down mid-stream, for the brook is six and seven feet in depth now; the pollard-willow stems are showing only half their height.

As to the huge burdocks, only the tips of some of their bur-bunches can be seen just above the water. Where the brook runs into the river, a circular space has been formed; there is a deep hole here at all times, but now the flood is out, the whereabouts of that hole can only be distinguished by the slow circular movement of the water at this particular spot: it is a slow heavy swirl round, and that is all.

I am simply amusing myself by threshing the trees and bushes in order to make the rats jump into the water—for at such times they plump into it like stones from the trees, into which they have climbed; when, on looking over the fields, I make out a figure coming in my direction. I can see that it is muffled up in a long light coat, and that is all. Directly, however, it gets near enough for me to see the drain-pipe hat, I know it is Billy.

He did not seem pleased to see me, but when he found that I was not fishing, he was all smiles directly. I had seen him fish in that dull swirling hole: we should never have thought about fishing there in a flood, but Billy knew something.

"Are ye goin' to stop an' see me fish? If ye

are, keep quiet an' don't move about, an' I'll show ye somethin'."

From his sacred hat he drew forth a line of the finest water cord, with a stout gut perch-hook on it; then he fixed on a blue float with white top, pulled out a stick from the bushes near, where he had hidden it on one of his former visits, tied the line on, and said he should bait. From one of the pockets of his old coachman's coat he next fetched out a large worm-bag.

"These ain't bramlin's, nor yet red uns; you wants big uns here for 'em to see, for the water's thick, an' they're hungry. These is dew-lobs; ain't they picturs? I knows how deep to go—I don't need to plum it."

He dropped his line in about a yard from the swirl. Now the float was in it, the white top showing out from the discoloured water; then it was gone. Billy struck, and out he fetched a bream that could not have weighed less than two pounds.

"Have somethin' better afore long," he muttered, as he dropped the fish behind him. Down swings the float, and it goes under with a rush. Billy

strikes, up comes the float and line, minus the stout gut and perch-hook. "That's a jack, hold hard! I'll have ye!" From his hat he fetched a gimp trace with a small pike-hook whipped on; and this time Billy put two large lob-worms on, and threw in. Down went the float as before.

After a few moments, up it popped, and then went down: the old boy struck all right this time, as he said; and he landed as nice a pike with his primitive-looking tackle as any one would wish to see.

Baiting with a couple again, just to see if there was another, but without any result, he changed his trace for a gut perch-hook as before, and went on fishing. Bream, roach, dace, and perch did he keep pulling out of that hole, all large fish, until he had a great flashing scaly heap behind him; in fact, he said he thought he must leave a few for another day. But the best of the sport was yet to come.

A few yards up the stream, a great pollard stem jutted half across it under water, forming a sort of dam in the stream. The water was perfectly quiet, and clearer than it was in the hole.

From a movement that he caught sight of just beyond the stem, Billy thought he would try and see what he could get there.

He was well rewarded for his experiment, for in a very short time he caught three good trout. "Now," said Billy, "I shall go home: you'll have some on 'em, wun't ye? They're real good uns."

The old fellow's luck made him very chatty as I walked home beside him; his heavy bag he would carry all himself. "It don't do to go by the look o' things at times," he observed; "any port is a good un in a storm. All the fish in that part of the river go where you see me pull these out; they gets out o' the rush o' the river, an' they feeds in the brook. You keep it to yerself, if ye don't care to fish."

But I did care, for that brook taught me more about natural history of one kind and another than I at that time could have thought possible. Billy and his piscatorial hat have vanished from the scene, for the good old fisherman has gone home long ago. The brook is there, so are the fish in flood-time, but I am not able to go there

now if I wished, for the property has changed owners.

In some places fish are very difficult to catch if they are any size; in other spots you may pull them out, as a farm youngster once told me, as fast as you like to put your line in. Now, to look at, this pond was one of the most ordinary character: it was only a small pond in a clayey meadow, fringed round with bushes on all sides excepting one.

The bottom was continually trampled and stirred up for a considerable distance out—quite one-half of the pond—by the cattle going to drink on that side, and by their standing in it up to their bellies to cool themselves in the summer time. So that the part of the pond which was too deep for them to wade in was small. The ducks and geese swam and dabbled there also. I have passed the place frequently of late—the pond is close to the farmyard; and although the old-fashioned farm-house is nothing to look at, yet it has the reputation now that it had in my younger days, when I fished there, of being the best tench-pond in the district. So far as I have been able to glean,

this pond has not been looked after or cared for, beyond not being suffered to be fished to death.

If you were allowed a day's fishing, you were not supposed to ask for another directly afterwards; as no one did so, all things went well. The fish were of a nice size, from a pound in weight up to two pounds — real beauties, that would take a nice worm freely. I have lived to see waters that teemed with fish at one time ruined and made almost tenantless by modern bungling or improvements so called. Fish are quite capable of taking care of themselves if allowed to do it; they know what suits them better than we do.

The very best fish I have ever seen or eaten, and the most handsome I have ever painted, were odd fish, got from odd bits of water, where they had been left for years with all their natural enemies, man excepted, to take their own chance.

CHAPTER IX.

WANDERERS.

A WHALE had been seen several times, spouting, as it passed up and down the open channel opposite my native village on the coast of North Kent, and efforts had been made to drive the great creature into shallow water, so that it might be stranded and killed, but all to no purpose. At last, under the direction of a notable old sea-dog, who went by the name of Dick the Whaler, the feat was accomplished, to the great mortification of those who had tried but failed to do the business. Some of Dick's partisans and admirers, in order to commemorate the event, requested one of his friends who enjoyed the reputation of being a regular "dabster" at verse-making, to compose

something worthy of the occasion, in order still further to humble the pride of the other leader.

The poet was supplied with a bundle of quill pens, plenty of ink and paper, and besides these, two large dumpy bottles of "ager mixter," so called. After two days had elapsed a deputation went to see what he had succeeded in producing. This was received by the wife, who told them that the work was proceeding well, but they must not "worrit him." On the fourth day she let them know that they could now come up for the verses. With all the gravity befitting the situation, these were handed over that evening; the poet also contributing a tune which he had composed to suit them. They began as follows:—

"There cummed unto our coast a whale,
A very big whale indeed,
T'others couldn't catch un,
But we did—
Hip, hip, hip, hooray!"

Our village was not critical, and the verses were sung and roared through the quiet streets to the inspiriting accompaniment of a drum and a key-bugle.

Whenever I hear of a stray visitant, some bird or other that is unusually uncommon, the first

line of that absurd composition is apt to recur to my mind.

The night-crow, white-topped heron, or night-heron, we are told by a recognised authority of the present day, was recorded first in May 1872; but it had been to my own knowledge shot frequently without the fact being noticed. Like the bittern, it only reaches us to be shot. Early impressions are very lasting, and having been "bird-struck" even as a youngster, I remember as though it had only taken place yesterday, how old Craft brought in from the marshes, where he had shot it, the finest night-heron that had been seen by us. That was long before the year 1872.

As a rule old Craft was very communicative as to his luck, but on the particular afternoon to which I refer he stood before the bar of "The Royal Anchor," with his gun and a bunch of birds, in a decidedly glum state of mind. The worthy landlord chaffed him about it, asking what ailed him? Had he seen a wreck? Had he run out of "ager" medicine? Had his pigs cut their throats, swimming down the creek again? This last allusion referred to what was usually a danger-

ous topic to touch on, but as the questions were followed up by a glass of his "most pertickler," offered free of cost, and as the landlord usually was ready to purchase any fowl that old Craft wanted to sell, the reference to a tussle he had had, in night-shirt and cap, with his cantankerous swine was allowed to pass.

"Now then, Craft, what ails ye?" he was asked again, as he put down his glass.

"Well, I shot and missed him," was the laconic but vague reply.

"Sure-ly, ye ain't pulled on that 'ere new coyman, have ye?" The coyman referred to was the man in charge of the great duck-decoy.

"No, 'twas a bird; I never sin one like it afore."

This statement reaching the ears of the customers in the bar-parlour (birds concerned every one in various ways), out they walked to hear about it. "Wet up, Craft, an' yarn it off to us."

"I was comin' over the last ma'sh afore you gits to Stangate creek, when up gits a bird somethin' bigger 'an a coot, with white feathers a-hangin' down his back. I got a bit flustered,

seein' as 'twas most onusual-like, an' missed him."

"'Twas a trick o' that 'ere furrin heathen o' a coyman, Craft," said the landlord, "you may depend on it. He'd catched one o' them 'ere cat-scratchin' coots, and tied his missus's apern-strings roun' its neck."

"Ay," added one of his chums, "them 'ere heathens frum the shires is most fit to do any outlandish work. Josher here reckins as he'll pull a stroke-oar in coyman's boat afore long."

"'Twas only last week he went down to the long splash for to git a couple o' ducks; 'tis a good place for 'em, you know. Well, there waun't a sign o' one above or below. He couldn't mek it out nohow, for he'd niver missed *seeing* on 'em, if he didn't *git* 'em. It reg'lar dumbfounded Josher; and presently out from the reeds cums a couple o' ducks with white feathers in their beaks, cuttin' most owdacious capers on the water, tossin' their heads up, quackin' an' spinnin' about in most onairthly fashion. Josher watched 'em fur a time, then he shot 'em. That 'ere coyman, to keep t'others from cumin' to shoot there,

though it waun't nowhere near the landmarks fur the coy, had clipped their wings, put feathers in their beaks, an' turned 'em out there, to scare fowl away,—the heathen! If he don't ha' done cuttin' them capers he'll find his coy raised, an' he wun't want it done more 'an once, we reckins. Depend on it, Craft, 'twas a coot that warmint had figgered up with apern-strings."

These remarks only made Craft feel indignant. "Had any on 'em sin him in specks? Had any on 'em sin him fed with a spoon, or led about by his little gal?"

No one replying to these questions, he left his bunch of birds, seized his gun, and went out, stating in the most emphatic manner that "he would hev the creeter if 'twas in the ma'sh,—if he raised the coy over it."

Perhaps I might as well explain what raising the coy means. The ducks come into the decoy —or decoys, as the case may be—from open waters early in the morning, leaving it to feed again as evening draws near. It is when resting in the decoy that they are coaxed up one of the decoy-pipes and get captured. Extreme quiet

must be maintained if the capture is to be a fortunate one, for it is absolutely necessary that the fowl should never leave the decoy-pond except of their own accord. To be frightened off a few times would ruin the working of it all, and heavy penalties are incurred by wilful disturbance. "To raise the coy" was the worst threat that any of the more daring spirits could venture on in the marshes, for the decoy was generally respected as sacred.

In from the marshes proudly walked Craft on the day after the conversation I have related, with the strange bird, its beautiful head-plumes lovingly arranged on the dark neck and shoulders.

Craft was triumphant: he marched to "The Royal Anchor" and showed his bird; the news spread, and thither all the choicest spirits flocked after him. What bird was it? No one knew, but it was universally set down as "a Frencher o' some sort." Then one of them suggested that the bird should be shown to Mr Grind the lawyer, who was supposed to know everything. This was done, but he said that he had never seen such a handsome bird before, and did not in the least know what it was. Then as a last resource they sent for

Dick the Whaler. He looked at it, turned his quid, rubbed his chin, and spoke: "If its feet was webbed-like, but they ain't, I should fancy 'twas one o' them 'ere pingin (penguin) things, fur some o' they outlandish things has top-knots; but this 'ere is afore my recknin'." After this sage utterance the bird was given over to the care of the host: all settled down to make themselves comfortable, and Dick had to tell over again how the whale was beached. In the small hours two figures were seen going home a little unsteadily, full of whales, top-knot herns, and "mixter."

"Can you tell me where your fine raven was procured?" I asked a man who was walking up the street with one tucked under his arm like a rooster.

"From Sussex," he replied. "The friend that sent him to me said that a few pairs lingered there yet."

This was some years ago. I fear they may have been rooted out by this time. This fine handsome bird is one of our wanderers; from the earliest time he has been an object of consideration, and all have credited him with superhuman

intelligence, and regarded him as a bird of evil omen. This to a certain extent is not a matter of wonder, for he is one of nature's scavengers, and where he thinks his services are required there he will be. He may now be considered as practically banished from England; though he would come again if folks would let him, but they will not; he is outlawed, and a price put on his head. In past times, when people threw objectionable matter into the streets, he, with the kites to help him, cleared all up. I have seen ducks and pigs doing the same thing: these creatures once did nearly all our sanitary work, so far as the streets were concerned; but it did not keep the cholera from the place. It came, and the ravens came in advance of it; but why they did so remains a mystery that could never be accounted for by those of us who escaped that horrible visitation. It is not the least use trying to account for everything in the matter-of-fact manner in which things are usually disposed of at the present time. I have thought it all over, but to no purpose; I know only that when the scourge left the place the ravens were seen there no more.

With the fierce and hardy Scandinavian sea-rovers the raven was a bird of note, though for what purpose he was used by them we have no record left to tell us. It has been conjectured by those whose deep research into historical matters give their views great weight, that the ravens (of which two varieties existed then as now, the black and the black-and-white raven) were carried by these rovers in their war-ships, to be turned out when on their exploring and plundering expeditions. They watched the flight of the bird, and if it did not return, they sailed in the same direction, feeling certain that land of some kind must lie where the raven had made for. That fierce race of sea-kings evidently knew far more about the real nature of the bird than we do at the present time.

With the part the raven played some have associated the Greenland, Iceland, and Norwegian falcons, the noble gerfalcons, so called; but the raven is well known to have been an important factor, though a mysterious one, in all their high-handed proceedings. The pied raven belongs to the Faro Isles, and is called after them.

If the Scandinavians were originally of Asiatic origin, the record of the raven having been used by Noah no doubt must have been handed down to them. We have no authority for this theory, beyond the bare probability to which slight historical fragments point. In past times the bird no doubt owed his life in some measure to the belief that ancient members of his race fed the prophet Elijah. Where the Bible formed the only literature of the household—and it was read and acted on in a literal manner—it is no wonder that this bird went free. Some of the quiet women of our coast—their types are now only seen in paintings—when they spoke were listened to with respect, for they would wrestle in spirit, as they called it, with the head of the house until he was full of it, and gave in. If it had "been shown to them," as they would say, that a certain thing should not be done, as a rule it was left alone by the men-folk.

The last ravens' nest which was harried, to my knowledge, was upset by some one hired for the job, and not by the person one might have expected to do it. If it was supposed that ill-luck would

thus be diverted from the latter I cannot say. One thing is certain—the man who gave the order for the ravens' destruction has been dead for years, while the man who harried the nest is alive still and hearty, although nearly seventy years old. Last summer he climbed up one of the finest trees in the district like a squirrel.

The late E. T. Booth, whose matchless collection, which he generously left for the public benefit, shows his ardent search for the beautiful feathered creatures that are to be found in our island, has a good word to say for the raven. Writing in 1876, after a visit to Perthshire, he observes: "Few, if any, of these ravens (referring to some he saw there) had been bred in the immediate neighbourhood, having in all probability crossed the hills from the northern countries or the western islands. At that time of year they were perfectly harmless on the ground, preying only on wounded game or hares, and, as they always left that quarter before the breeding season, their visits were beneficial rather than otherwise." And again he says: "They were at all times so eager to make a meal off the dead game with which we baited our traps,

that I have known between two and three hundred captured in a single season; not that we wished to destroy them, but positively they insisted on getting into the traps we were forced to keep set, in order to check the increase of more destructive vermin."

I have quoted from this high authority because some, I know, have considered me a little one-sided and enthusiastic in pleading, as I still hope to do, for the preservation of some of the creatures in our country. Fortunately I do not stand alone in this. If ever a man studied the habits of birds impartially, it was E. T. Booth.

The raven has interested me at all times; not that my chances of studying him have been numerous, but I have made the most of those I had. That he admirably fills the place for which he was formed, no one that has seen him can doubt. He is, I think, the closest feeder of any bird I am acquainted with. "Waste not, want not," is evidently the principle he works upon. One might say of him as the negro said of the shark, "Him berry clean feeder, sah."

That grand bird the cob, or great black-backed

gull, whose wings extend five feet four inches, feeds on the same dead body at times as the raven, side by side, Odin's bird and the sea-vulture. This bird wanders; and it is a curious circumstance that the pure-looking sea-bird should be credited with far greater power for mischief than even the raven: yet such is the case. They go over the same kind of hunting-grounds, feed on the same kind of food, living and dead, and get trapped with the same baits. Owners of grouse-moors, I conclude, if they had their choice, would prefer to be visited by the ravens sooner than by the cobs. As the gull flaps along, his keen eyes detect the dead and wounded birds left after shooting. Down he swoops, and on the prey he gorges like a vulture—not on carrion, but on game. The next day he returns to find some more; and then others, seeing him making off in the same direction day after day, follow in the same course, for they know food is to be had of some sort. So that after a time a couple of pairs will hunt the moor regularly.

As the swallowing capacity of these birds is enormous, they are shot or trapped as soon as possible. I have seen the cob in many places, and in all

weathers, looming out through a sea-fog, resting on the sands in fine weather, and beating about when it is rough. He is a bird that you will not forget after you have once seen him. With our coast people he used not to be a favourite. When the small gulls left the tide for the fields, they looked for rough weather; but it might pass over, and they hoped it would. But when they saw the cob on the flats they were sure of it, and pulled their boats up on the beach.

It is curious how perfectly innocent creatures should by some folks get inevitably associated with the causes of misfortune. The bird only obeys his instincts of self-preservation in coming on the flats for a time; but the very fact of the creatures being one of the means of warning them of the coming storm, caused it to be regarded as something uncanny. I should like to see him again where I have watched him in past years; but he will come there no more in my time. Where he wanders it would be hard to say. The cob's eyes are very different from those of the raven; but they see much more than you can fathom, and they have the look of old, experienced eyes.

That beautiful bird, the waxwing, wrongly called the Bohemian chatterer, for it is really a very quiet creature, visits us from time to time; some have been shot recently. It would not interest my readers to give the dry details of their visits as they have occurred, so I leave them out of the question. This bird is a very remarkable one, with its fine crest and the red wax-like tips to the tail and some of the wing feathers; but although they are such lovely creatures, a few years ago they caused no little uneasiness in places they visited: in some way or other they got to be associated with coming trouble of a vague nature.

Red berries are sure to attract these birds, particularly those of the wild-rose and mountain-ash. As the waxwing is a voracious feeder, it is far more concerned about its stomach than its safety, and suffers accordingly. I have lately seen an account of one that allowed a miserable creature to get so close to it that when he fired he almost blew it to pieces. Our shores are certainly not hospitable ones for wanderers.

The nutcracker, that curiously spotted bird that looks like a jackdaw and woodpecker blended into

one, visits us, but it is very uncertain in its appearance. Some birds keep only to places where the supply of food is confined to certain limits; and this bird appears to be one of these, having a decided preference for fir-woods. That it has been killed in Scotland is not to be wondered at; but it is a rare visitant, blown over, probably much against its will, from more northern countries. Nothing surprises me more than the general opinion concerning the flights of rare visitors. Frequently I have been asked where are the real homes of some of the wanderers that reach us, and I have answered to the best of my ability; but it is very difficult to determine the real home of birds that are certainly known to have several in the course of a year. Our most common birds are for ever on the shift, hundreds in a place for a few days, and then gone again. How do they fly, thousands of miles some of them, without resting? They do not do this; but they do not stay here. Would you, or could you, walk one hundred miles, or half that distance, without resting? Certainly not; the idea would be ridiculous. And the birds could no more keep on flying for thousands of miles than you could keep on walking your fifty or a hundred.

They must rest, and they do rest where they can, on their journey. If you get a map you will see if it is not possible for them to do this after leaving England. How long would it take swift-winged birds to cross over to France, and from there to other places ?

The various works published on birds, our own British birds particularly, give more or less detailed accounts concerning the killing of some of these wanderers; but all rare birds, so called, do not get into the hands of preservers or collectors. In my young days I was in close touch with men and lads that sailed the sea in all directions: these were well acquainted with the birds they saw on the water, and upon the distant shores they visited. They had their own names for them, but that did not alter the birds in the least. As they were fishermen and fruit-boat men—a few only of the latter—their chances of observation were endless. Boys were rigidly excluded from the company of men in our community, and all the wondrous information (as it appeared to me then) was given me by lads who sailed with their fathers, supplemented at times by a sight of the bird-skins; for all the vessels carried fowling-guns. They knew

how to skin the birds and to prepare them; not for bird-preservers, but for ladies' muffs, and for feather capes—tippets, as they were called at that time.

I have seen very fine feather capes made from bird-skins brought home by them, and also some feather-work of a very novel character. The local artist would be coaxed by one or two clever ladies, always single ones, to draw the figure of some bird or birds on a sheet of the finest paper they could lay their hands on, after it had been properly stretched on a board. Often they could not decide how the bird should be drawn: a week or fortnight would pass over; then as a rule they would pick out the first sketch that had been shown them. As these preliminary studies afforded some very pleasing afternoons and evenings, time was not considered. The drawing having been made, the bill and feet were painted, as well as a background. Then with strong gum they fixed the feathers from the skins—a kind of feather-tiling it was, beginning naturally at the tail and finishing at the bill of the bird. I have seen very beautiful examples of this kind. The East India

Company was a power in the land then, and some who sailed in their magnificent ships brought boxes of splendid bird-skins home for their sisters, as well as drawings by native artists of the birds that the boxes contained. When these drawings were carefully traced off, the result was very superior in all respects to the work of our local genius.

As I said before, the boys had little to do with the affairs of their parents from the confidential point of view; and fine young fellows, men every inch of them, were classed as boys. And I can assure my readers that this sort of thing has not yet quite died out along the foreshores. Those lads who had visited foreign shores were eagerly sought out by the fowler when they reached port. From morning to night they yarned away about birds, questioning, comparing, and wondering; for the lads had seen birds as they were coming and going that the fowler had only seen on the shores. Practical natural history would be fully discussed sitting on the sides of a turned-up whale-boat.

I think that, if it could be got at, the list of unrecorded birds that have visited us would far

exceed those recorded; for the reason that some of them are very much alike, and when shot for food they have been plucked and eaten without questioning. If two or three geese were procured and the crew required them for dinner, no matter how rare one or the lot might be, it would have required far greater powers of persuasion than could be employed at that time of day to prevent them from being cooked.

The greenshank, in general form and habits like the redshank, save for its green legs and larger size, is one of those wanderers that travel at express speed. It is not such a common bird as its red-legged relative. Like the green sandpiper, it is seen, when on flight, in spots suitable for resting; and like the former bird, the greenshank, it follows the line of the hills that have moors near them: the wilder they are, the better for the bird. But even in places that are not likely to be disturbed it does not stay; it only rests and moves on.

I have seen the bird, and I have also seen different accounts of its habits by various writers; no two being alike, yet all true. One simple fact may be remembered by those who are from cir-

cumstances forced to draw their knowledge of birds from books — namely, that one and all, from the most common to the rarest, can and do adapt themselves to surrounding influences. With some few exceptions, which I need not refer to here, birds that are not molested are perfectly fearless.

Some writers have stated that the greenshank is one of the most difficult birds to study, or to get within shot of. Why should any one want to shoot it? Another states that he has lifted a greenshank off her nest, out on the open moorland, more than once. This gentleman, when fowling in Sutherlandshire, passed in his punt within thirty feet of thousands of those wary birds, the oyster-catchers; from never having been disturbed, they were perfectly fearless, and they took no more notice of him than they would of a seal floating by. He did not fire at the birds,—we have his word for that.

Seals are far more numerous than they are supposed to be by the general public. They can be seen mixed up with the young of sea-birds; some of these jabbering and squalling because the young seals have usurped their resting-places. Floating

by in calm weather, your glass will show you this and more.

Within a few miles from London, as travelling goes now, the gannets in their seasons can be seen flying and plunging with almost clock-work regularity, following the shoals of fish out over the sand-bar. It is a dangerous place that sand-bar; some of those who last visited it have not the least desire to repeat the trip. If these sanctuaries did not exist, our waters would soon be lifeless. Happily they do, and to them the feathered wanderers come in countless hosts, as they have ever done. Those seen on the shore-line, great as their numbers may be, are really only the fringe, so to speak, of the vast congregations that resort to the sanctuaries of the dreaded sand-bar.

The regular wanderers come now, as they have done from time beyond record, but not to the same places. The bittern, little bittern, hoopoe, and golden oriole would nest in England, I think, if they were permitted to do so.

Recently, birds have passed over the Surrey hills and woodlands in the night-time, from north-east to south-west, that by their trumpet-notes told

plainly what they were,—rare birds so-called, who have found out fresh haunts where they know they are safe.

The little stint, or he might be called a dwarf sandpiper, a delicate creature, six inches in length, is a feathered wonder. After breeding in Siberia, these little mites dash away to Africa and India; they also visit our own shores in considerable numbers. They look like small ox-birds, dunlins. One writer who has seen as much, or I may say more, of rough weather, watching the arrival and departure of wanderers, than generally falls to the lot of one observer, has called them "flighters," and a very appropriate term it is.

Beside me, as I write, are the wings of the curlew, snipe, sanderling, and the common gull. The first three show at a glance that they were formed for long continuous flight. Their journey, we know, is broken like that of other wanderers, but they go a vast distance before they break it. The wings of the gull are after a different fashion, being formed to enable the bird to beat to and fro, now here and now there, and to tack about. The divers proper, sprat-loons or sprat-divers,

have short stiff wings; but when fairly in flight, they would shoot past any gull like rockets.

With a few words about those large wanderers, the grey geese, I must close. Its name is used as synonymous with stupidity, yet nothing could be wider of the mark; for our domestic goose is by far the most sagacious bird we have in a state of domestication. As to the wild geese, all who know anything about them practically, will agree that the bump of cautiousness has with them reached its fullest development.

The brent or black geese are sea-geese, and these keep to the tide. The three grey geese I have mentioned include the grey lag, the bean, and the pink-footed goose. Unless by good fortune a specimen is procured on the spot, it is almost impossible to tell with a glass to which of the three species geese belong when feeding in the fields. I have seen small gaggles at times, but though one could tell that they were wild grey geese, I have never been allowed to get near enough to tell which variety they were.

If a specimen is procured, it by no means proves that the gaggle it was shot from were all of the

one species. The eastern counties are, from the nature of the wide open spaces found there, far more favourable grazing-grounds for them than any that could be found in the southern districts. Those birds I have seen were probably tired-out stragglers that had dropped from the main body when on flight, to go forward again when thoroughly rested. Punt-fowlers rely on brent-geese for sport and profit when fowling on the tide. They do at times, in most extraordinary and exceptional circumstances, get a shot at grey geese, but not very often. For these go to feed out in the great open spaces, flying out to the sands and sand-bars to rest and sleep, where there is not the least chance of getting at them.

The grey geese are far more plentiful in Scotland and Ireland than in England. This we have no cause to regret, for the birds graze very closely; and when they visit young crops it is a very serious matter, for they feed in the most systematic manner. Having very powerful wings, great distances to them are as nothing in going out to their feeding-grounds. To see them, if you did not know a little about their movements, you

might think they were resting somewhere in the immediate neighbourhood; but you would be deceived, for their resting-place might be twelve or twenty miles away.

Even in their nesting habits the wanderers are to a certain extent contradictory, for the grey lag goose breeds in the moss-hags of the moors. Curlews, golden plovers, and dunlins nest on the open moors, at the time when the linnet sings from the tangle above them. At that time you can hear the crow of the grouse-cock, the whistle of the plover, and the pipe of the dunlin: they are all there when their season comes round. Being early breeders, they are ready to go before the linnet has got his first brood out in the yellow broom. Great birds come shrieking and wheeling about, beating in all directions, except where their young are squatting. These are curlews. There is not the least necessity for this, but they seem to do it just to keep up the character which has been given them, that of guardians of the moors.

CHAPTER X.

MORE ABOUT FOWLING ON LONGSHORE.

I WAS talking late one evening about the damage that had been caused by a very heavy inshore gale, with one of my friends of the North Kent marshes, when a message was brought that a couple of men wished to see me. Going to the door, I found there two individuals whose exploits in the smuggling line I have mentioned elsewhere. Muffled up to their eyes they were, and they carried their duck-guns under their arms, the locks as usual being bound round with the leg of an old worsted stocking. "We wants ye," said they, "to cum along the beach with us, to see the work this 'ere gale's done—'tis a sight; an' the birds is howlin', croakin', an' whistlin' like

mad. Hark to 'em." Their cries were plainly enough to be heard; some of them were passing directly overhead, making for the tide. It was just what I wanted. There was no moon, but after the gale the sky was perfectly clear, a deep blue, with the stars twinkling merrily; one of those nights on which you can see things in the distance more plainly than when it is bright moonlight.

Telling my kind host that I should not be home before morning, I caught up my gun and made for where my friends were waiting for me. Before I reached the door, however, my host's daughter suggested that, if I must go, I had better leave my gun at home, for the beach-hills were dangerous to travel through after a storm. I hesitated for one moment, then went back and placed it in the gun-rack, and bidding her a hearty good night I dashed out into the darkness; for, to confess the truth, I feared lest I might be persuaded to stop where I was.

"Where's your gun?" was the first question.

"I left it in the gun-rack."

"Ah yes; somebody as we won't mention asked ye to leave it, for fear you'd shoot yourself in the

dark. Well, you knows best about that, but you ought to ha' brought it with ye." To which my only reply was that I could help to gather the birds they shot, and I would carry them as well, leaving them quite free for all the shooting. With this they were contented. "They had got me with them," they said, "and that was all they cared about." The elder of the two, however, muttered something to himself about "wimmen folks bein' extra pertickler keerful, when mistletoe was about."

We passed through the silent streets of our fishing village, keeping the middle of the road to prevent our footsteps from waking the sleepers, for sea-boots rattle terribly on cobble-stones and pavements. Past the great sluice we go, over a marsh on to the sea-wall, steadily making for the beach. As we near two large posts that do duty as fishing-guides, we are challenged by a coast-guard, and told to stand.

"What are you about?" he asks.

"Goin' to the beach fur a shot or two, if we can get it."

"All right, I know you; but who's that with you?"

"A friend o' ours."

"Give your name."

This is familiar to the guardian of the coast, and he asks me to give his respects to my father when I go back to Surrey again, for he was his old school-mate. They know a good deal about each other in small communities such as ours.

A couple of miles of very wary travelling brings us to the beach, where for some moments we are lost in wonder at the sight that presents itself. As far as we can see, nothing but huge hillocks of shingle are visible, quite as large as good-sized cottages, with regular lanes between each; they had been thrown up by the waves during the late gale.

"What do ye think on it? Looks queer at night, don't it? Jist hear them birds hollerin'," remarked one of my companions. "The tide flows in a hour's time; we ken git further down, an' look at things afore it flows. All the birds is out on the slub a mile off; there wun't be a chance fur a shoot yet."

It was a wild tramp under that clear, dark-blue, midnight sky, and one which I shall never forget. How far those heaps extended we did not know,

for after we had tramped about a mile, we collected a large armful of dry seaweed and placed it in a hollow, where we sat on it. A death-like stillness was all around, save when the fowl called to each other. We sat in silence for some minutes, each occupied with his own thoughts.

Presently a hissing whisper reaches us: it is the tide coming in over the sand-flats a mile away. Now is the time to hear the voices of the night; for as each swift wave bears food of some kind before it, all sand-loving creatures hasten to meet the flow. Hosts of fowl are passing overhead, far out of sight, but not out of hearing; from the great marshes, ten miles away, they come to meet the tide. Now we can hear the break and lap of the waves, for the tide rushes in here like a mill-race. Nearer and nearer come the babel of bird-voices. Then my friends break the silence in excited undertones, as they check off the various species according to their call-notes.

"Hark at them wigeons, *we-ohing* about. You shall hev *we-oh*, my pretty boys, directly! Hear 'em 'ere mallards; why, there's a whole crew on 'em close handy! Cuss that 'ere bargender duck!

She makes as much noise as a Newfoundland dog with her barkin'; she ought to have her head blowed off for it, that she did. There's jack-herns about; jest hear 'em raspin' their coughs out! If we knocks one of 'em over instead of a duck, it wun't be much of a bite. Hear that?"

"Well, what is it?"

"Why, that 'ere screamin' holler on the water; there 'tis agin: you surely hears it now."

Over the fast-flowing tide comes a cry which, if once heard, is not soon forgotten. It is the half-human cry of some sprat-divers exulting over a good meal after the storm. Snipes pass over, not quietly, but shouting their loudest, scape, scape, skep, skep! These birds are certainly full of conversation when feeding on the tide. The curlews' cry is heard continually,—whistle and wail, wail and whistle, easily distinguishable above all the others. A solitary oyster-catcher, so far as we can judge from the notes, can be heard at intervals. A mixed crowd of dunlins and sanderlings fly chattering by us, very close as we know, though we cannot see them yet. There are plenty of geese about also, but as they can see in the dark, and according to

fowling tradition never sleep, the chances are very much against the gunners. The common gulls cry shrilly, and the cobs bark in harsh, hacking notes; they are awake like the rest, for birds in stormy weather feed when they can.

Nets stretched on stakes let you know what birds move at night over the sand-flats; also how very early some other birds get up in the morning to pull them out of it. Turning to his companion, the shooter next to me said—

"We've come out on a fool's errand. If I'd know'd it, I'd ha' stopped at home. When we started I thought we should ha' had a job to load an' fire fast enough, but not a shot shall we git to-night or mornin' proper; the minster hev just banged out three o'clock. Them 'ere fowl won't come inshore, not a bit on it. Jest hear how restless they are hollerin'; I've heerd my father speak of the same thing arter a storm. There's a body o' some sort out over the bar wants to come in. An' the fowl knows it's out there; they've seen it, an' they won't settle till it comes ashore. If it don't, Shoreland's lights will be seen agin, lookin' for it all along foreshore."

This was enough for me, and I at once proposed returning. Rather to my surprise, they were ready at once; so, although we started with great expectations, we came home without firing a shot.

After a heavy gale, when the fowl can feed, they do so voraciously; and there is then a vast amount for them to feed on, for the slub and sand get stirred up to some considerable depth, and a whole host of marine creatures with it. The fowl then fill their stomachs and retire into the marshes to rest in the most expeditious manner, without coming so close inshore as they would do at other times. There is another matter to be taken into consideration. On those clear nights when the sky is indigo-blue overhead, the fowl can see you distinctly although you cannot see them. I have found a moonlight night, with cloud-scuds passing over the moon, the best time for night-fowling, if you know where your companions are posted, and can trust implicitly to their keeping their places. Terrible accidents have taken place from this important matter being neglected. No shore-shooter, if he is worth the name, ever places himself within range of his companion's

gun; in fact, one who would draw on the range of another would not be allowed to do it a second time. The unwritten laws of the foreshores are not to be lightly broken by any one.

All birds are endowed with great intelligence. It is not all who are able to make friends with them or with animals; but those who can do this are more than astonished at what they are able to teach. Any wild animal or bird will at times outwit a dozen men or boys; and so far as the latter are concerned, it is saying much for the creature's astuteness, for boys have the hunting instincts all over them, from the crown of their head to their feet, if they be true boys and healthy ones. A man may have all the birds that money can get for him in the finest aviaries; he may have the most costly works on the subject, from Audubon and Gould down to Lilford, and yet he may know nothing about the real life of the creatures; for that knowledge can only be got out of doors in their haunts, and to get it is the work of a lifetime. Yet all these works are of course excellent and good in their way, though I learned more on a dreary wind-swept beach in my early

years, and far more in after-life in the woods and on the hills of our southern counties, than ever books could tell me, though I have had access to some of the best.

Keen-witted creatures the fowl are when alive, and wonderful travellers; and the command to increase and multiply has been carried out to perfection, as the shores of the whole known world prove. Man himself, with all his arts and modern weapons, is very often left with empty pockets when he goes out after fowl; the best fowlers on the tide will come home at times without even a little jack-snipe, as the keenest angler will come home now and again without a gudgeon. Fowlers in my shooting-days were men who worked at their trade as long as there was work to do, or as long as the weather allowed them to do it. There has been a great revolution in business matters since that time, and very fortunate it is for all. Things were rough at times and wages low; when our men shot it was in order to sell the fowl. It would take three or four ducks to provide a meal for even a small family,—they are small birds when picked; and as to curlews, well, any healthy person, man or woman, could eat

three at a meal comfortably. Six full curlews well hung and nicely cooked, if nothing else was served, I should call about enough for two people. A searching north-easter will let you know what teeth were given for. After being out for hours, with only a pipe of tobacco as a stop-gap, one feels as if one could eat even "hoody-crow pie." Fortunately there was always a sale for the beautiful fowl, and if one fowler had bad luck, a companion who had been more fortunate shared his bag with him; the next day matters might be reversed.

As a rule, the day's sport, when the fowls were sold and the money laid out for home use, after paying for powder and shot, was worth one large loaf, one ounce of tea, one ounce of tobacco, and a pound of bacon to cut in rashers and fry, making a meal for the family, who anxiously waited for father's return. But this was when matters went fairly well; many a time have I seen them all come in from different points of the marshes without a bird.

Wild ducks, or mallards, as they are called, were shot as a rule at flight-time, coming in or going out to their feeding-grounds. The early

morning, just as it is getting light, is a very good time for trying for them in any open stream running into the marshes. They are the most valuable fowl, both as regards size and table qualities; and as a rule the most difficult to get, for they can hardly be called sea-ducks, although they go in large numbers to rest on the open sea. Those at least which come to us from foreign shores do so: our home-bred birds, which when dead are easily picked out from the others on account of their superior size, visit the open sea when compelled; the others do it continually, going out to sea in the day and coming inland to feed at night. The widgeon is the shore-shooter's best friend, their numbers are so great; and feeding as they do on the sea grass and weed, they are about when the others are not. Fowling on the tide as a matter of course bags the largest number; but when parties are out after widgeon, the shore-shooters lay up where they think the birds will come when put off the water by the shot. If they know each other, they generally agree to fire together if the birds come within range, and divide the spoil. Beautiful birds they

are when on the wing, with breasts like satin: *breast*, by the way, is a fowler's word; to be correct one should rather say *under-plumage*. These birds are extraordinarily cunning. The young ones of course often fall easy victims on their first journey; but a drake widgeon, one that has escaped for several seasons from punt-guns, shore-guns, and decoys, knows something. It is these learned birds that *we-oh* so much; they look after the safety of the others as much as they can, and after their own safety particularly.

If any one of those who have written about the cruelty of sport were turned out with a company of widgeon-shooters for the night, without too much inside their stomachs, to wait in a hole dug in the slub, or at the very best in an old tub lined with straw, for the fowl, he would fancy the cruelty lay on the other side. Indeed before morning he might have come to consider himself a very ill-used individual; having to grope on the ooze for fowl in mud-pattens is not cheerful work, even if you have brought three or four down. Shore-shooting is the hardest sport existing, so far as the bag is concerned; it is a game of

chance, and the chances are in favour of the birds. There is no fear that those wild-fowls that do not breed in England will be exterminated, if they are shot at or decoyed when they come to our shores; for if the supply in the United Kingdom were to fail, Holland alone could glut the market: it is from Holland that our markets are chiefly supplied.

Teal are delicate little creatures (miniature ducks you might call them). A slight blow will kill a teal. Sometimes by great good fortune a single shooter, or a party of guns, may fall in with a lot, but this is an exceptional piece of good fortune. The decoys get the pick of them; they are dainty feeders, and they find food especially prepared for them there. A teal drake, in my opinion, when in full plumage, is one of the handsomest members of the family he belongs to. These birds are very quick on the wing, and require to be waited on at once when they spring. Red-headed pochards, or dun-birds, fall to the fowlers at times, but to a certain extent they are local in their choice of feeding-grounds; the Essex marshes and mud-flats are favoured by them more

than the Kentish shores. Scaup-ducks get knocked over on the mussel-scalps at times; they generally find their way to the bird-preservers.

Food has much to do with a bird's reputation for table purposes; yet I have made experiments with so-called carrion feeders for the table, and better birds I have never eaten; so that it is often only in the idea of the thing. The hooded crow, dun crow, Danish crow, the grey crow of the shore, the dun crow of the shore-shooters,—by all these names is the hooded crow known in different localities,—follows the sportsmen like their shadows, but at a safe distance from gunshot. He is near cousin to Odin's own bird, the raven. Like his larger relative, he is wise, and he employs all his five wits for his own benefit alone. Drifting to and fro up and down the edge of the shore, circling high up over the beach and the benty sand-hillocks, just to see if any one with a gun is crouched in one of the countless hollows made by the tide, he keeps watch all day long for a fowl that may drop wounded out of sight. Where sand and beach pebbles are hurled up, in all sorts of ridges, hills, and hollows, there he hunts in the most determined manner. He heeds not any of the calls he

may hear from feeding fowl; after flapping down to them for a moment, back he comes to these parts of the beach I have mentioned. He knows that fowl come there also; and the shooters know it too, and there they come to lie in wait for them, or to put them up out of the bents and tide-flashes.

Curlew, grey plover, snipe, and woodcock are very partial to this broken foreshore. So quickly do the birds dash out of the bent tussocks, and with such marvellous speed do they twist in and out of the scattered hillocks, that the chances are far more in their favour than in that of the guns. I know this well: once upon a time I got myself tripped up in these bents, and my gun went off as I fell. I rose and reloaded, my companion quietly observing, "It might have been worse." He moved on a few yards, when up got a snipe, darting and *scaping* in the most frantic manner. It was a snap-shot, and, as we thought, a miss, when all at once one wing dropped. He was down—but where? That was the question. The old saying about looking for needles in bundles of hay could have been very well applied to the search for that snipe on the broken shore. The water-spaniel had been left at home, tired out with a

rough turn he had got the day before; so we could look for it ourselves. We agreed to walk wide apart, until we got to where the bird appeared to drop, and then to come and meet each other. As we drew down towards the spot where the snipe dropped his wing, from a hollow in front of us out dashed a dun crow, darting like any hawk. I fired, and missed him clean; my friend let drive and hit him: for Hoody mounts up, cuts some capers, and then comes down whirling like a shuttlecock. In the hollow he had darted from we found a few fragments of the snipe, and as my friend (like myself) had the gift of using forcible language in unlimited quantities, something was said.

"I let him have it, didn't I?"

"Well, it looked like it; but you are not able to count much on a dun crow."

"No; the devil eat him, for gobblin' that 'ere snipe: there's a shilling gone clean, true as I'm a sinner. I'll have him, if I wear the soles o' my boots off lookin' for him."

"All right; but no crow-hunting with loaded guns for me. I have had one bit of bad luck; I do not want another."

"What shall we do, then?"

"Why, lay the guns down in this strip of thick bents, and stick this bit of drift-wood up where we lay them, so that we can place our hands on them easily without having to hunt about for them."

"All right, we shall sail now; let's have that 'ere damned crow."

It was easier said than done. Scrunch, scrunch, rattle, rattle, over the beach, but no dun crow. "Where have he got to, eh?" There again was the question. "The father of evil must ha' helped him hide; but we'll have him yet."

As we were looking close to the edge of the tide, out from a hollow half filled with sea-weed rushed the crow, yelling like a madman. With a yell louder still than the crow's, my companion, who was some distance off, told me to board him. For the second time that day I went sprawling, my feet having been noosed by the wiry treacherous bents.

"I'm a-comin',—I'll have him—where is he?" The crow was out of sight. "There he goes! All right, you can sail, I'm overhaulin' on yer now; it's no good your hollerin' for mercy, not a bit on

it. You gobbled that 'ere snipe. I got ye now." Not quite, for the man's feet caught in the tough wire-like blite roots, and into a shallow salt-water pool he went head first.

Once more we lost that crow; ten minutes afterwards we saw him making his way across a small deep creek. "If I drowns, I'll have ye. Yes, if I goes under with ye;" and so saying the shooter at once proceeded to take off the heavier portion of his clothing. But this wet job he was spared, for a mussel-picker on the scalps, on the other side of the narrow deep creek, came running up to see who or what it was that had been wrecked; and seeing him the crow made for shore lower down, ran up a gripe, and there our companion caught him. The catch was mutual, for our friend's right hand was bleeding when he held the bird up. A dun-crow can fight. "Ah, you can holler; you eat that 'ere snipe, didn't ye, eh? Take that 'ere fur it." *Whack!*

The life of a shore-shooter has a beneficial effect in training the man, for it gives him self-command and patience, combined with keen observation; and without these qualities you will never get

near enough to fowl to shoot them. I have been outwitted hundreds of times by wild creatures,—sometimes to my great delight, and again at times to my very great mortification.

It has only been in the latter part of my life that I have been able to fully understand wild creatures; there is so very much for you to forget, before you can really know a little of the truth. Superficial observation is useless; theories are both dangerous and misleading, with regard to the beautiful and gifted creatures formed to have their place with us on the earth and the waters. They are gifted with a rare intelligence, which at times is most baffling to man's understanding. There is good reason for birds being so frequently mentioned in one of the oldest and best of books. As to the legitimacy of killing these for food, — if bullocks were shot in a meadow and dressed there, according to some enlightened ones that would be cruel sport; but as they are killed in the slaughter-house, it only represents to these good and highly sensitive people so many sirloins and legs of mutton of the very best and tenderest quality.

A man I knew kept fowls for the table, pure Dorkings. As they grew plumper every day he would take a basket with food in it, scatter it among them, and sigh deeply. After a few days of this, with a mournful countenance he would give the order for a couple to be placed in a fatting-coop; then, when he had satisfied himself that they were just right, he would send for a man to wring their necks, giving him a shilling for the job; and while the deed was doing he would go off on a long walk. His wife and daughters were as tender-hearted as he was; it ran in the family. Yet the servants always noticed that, whatever they might eat or leave on the dinner-table, they invariably finished up the fowls. This was possibly on the same principle as actuated one of the kings of the Cannibal Islands, who ate his grandfather out of respect.

Before concluding this chapter, I will give a list of the swimmers and waders that a shore-shooter (if he be fortunate enough to get them) would offer for sale as food for the table. Mallards, widgeons, red-headed pochards, dun-birds, teal, geese (but these very rarely, for they are

shot on the tide as a rule), curlews, jack-curlews, whimbrel (in the season), godwits (rarely), grey plover and golden plover, peewits, green plovers, woodcocks, snipes, jack-snipes, redshanks, dotterels (occasionally), sanderlings, dunlins, and stints. Other birds were fit to eat, but the list I have given comprised nearly all that were sold at the time I used to go with shooters.

If a man fancies he knows too much, or if he feels unduly elated over what little he does know, let him find some lonely shore (there are some such still), and there let him join a company of poor but honest shore-shooters. In less than a fortnight his fancies will leave him. Some of the truest and noblest hearts I have ever known beat under a fisher's and fowler's blue jersey.

Sport it was certainly, the best that a man could have; but in many cases it was necessary sport. There the birds were, if you could get them; straight shooting meant putting money into empty pockets. Very few that had the means to do so could resist buying a tempting bunch of fowl fresh from the tide. In the first place, they are very beautiful, their plumage is so bright and pure; more

than that, there is a mystery about them,—they come and go at no man's bidding; to and fro, here to-day, gone to-morrow. Birds of the night, or at least of the darkness, they might be fitly called: the shores at night are never silent, not even in summer. The fowl are gone for a brief time, but some small waders remain, to pipe and twit to the gentle ripple of the tide when it is calm and quiet.

Times and often have I wandered along the shore long after the sun has dipped, leaving behind it that rich light haze that floats along so full of warm colour just off the land. Through it the fishing-boats drift like purple shadows; the gulls are at rest in the marshes behind the sea-wall; nothing is to be heard but the murmur of the tide, and the pipe of the dotterel as it starts up unseen before you in the twilight. The long-shore is at rest.

Again, a bank of clouds, with a gleam of silver on their top edges, breaks away; then the moon lights up for a short time a waste of waters, for it is full flood-tide with the wind dead on shore. The waves

come thundering up to their utmost limit, nearly reaching the base of the huge sea-wall. The fowl have returned; they are passing overhead from open water, for it is far too rough for them to-night. How they gabble and cry! The moon is now completely hidden; unless the wind shifts and clears all, we shall leave the beach: three times have we been down with the spray drifting over us. To and fro the birds are rushing, over and through the very crests of the waves that leap in thunder up the beach; they are curlews, their wail betrays them. It is not often they behave in this way, but to-night they are as restless as the foaming waters; sensitive creatures at all times they are. All old seafaring men note the ways of fowl, those of the waders particularly. One circumstance connected with them I can well remember. For nearly a day before one of the most disastrous gales of many years, hosts of waders were shooting along close inshore in long continuous lines. Where they came from no man knew, or where they were going to. Before the last great mob were out of sight the gale burst in all its fury; it had been

blowing hard before, now it was in full force. Great poplars, that had long been landmarks for those at sea, as they stood three miles away in the marshes, were seen to go down; reed-stacks vanished, being whirled all over the place in fragments like wisps of straw. Some few men, and a few only, kept the beach; the rest went indoors to smoke and think. The women, married and single, with shawls drawn closely over their heads, gathered to comfort each other if they could; for some of their men were out. When there was a lull in the storm they sought the beach; but they did not stay there long, for battered forms began to come ashore.

About the vexed question of the foreshores in certain districts I shall say nothing,—it is no business of mine; I have left the tide. But if the British public do not care to claim what they have had for centuries—and that is the right to shoot on the foreshores within and beyond high-water mark—why, they must just put up with things. When a certain class try to claim the foreshores, within the limits of flotsam and jetsam, to make money

out of them—to let them out, in fact, for shooting wild-fowl—matters require looking into. Things have changed, of course, greatly of late years; but I do think that such a course would never have been attempted, or even dreamed about, in those younger days when I fowled along shore.

THE END.

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